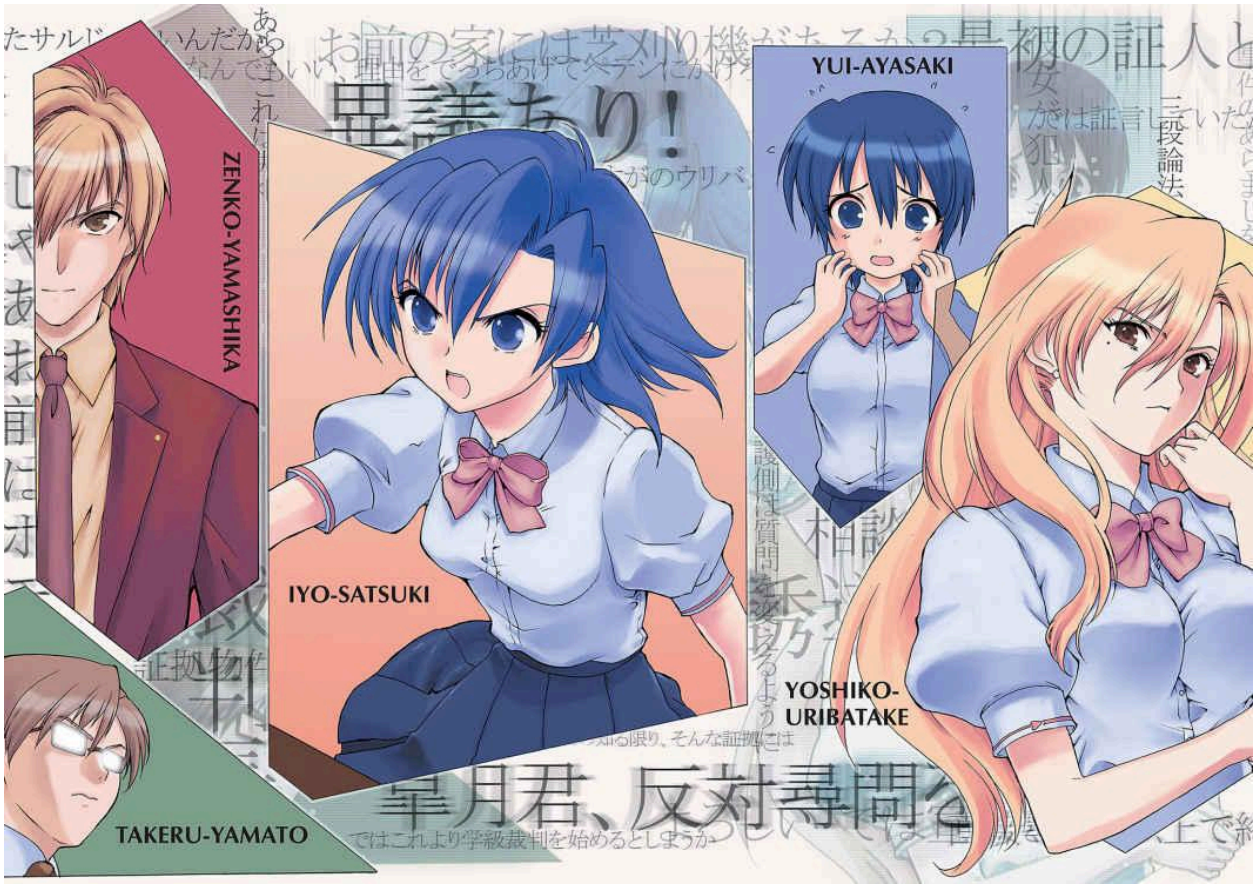
タクティカルSSジャッジメント
Tactical Judgment
紅の超新星、降臨!
Toru Shiwasu
師走トオル
FUJIMI
MYSTERY
BUNKO

たくていかる・じゃっじめんとSS


ZENKO-YAMASHIKA
IYO-SATSUKI
YUI-AYASAKI
YOSHIKO-
URIBATAKE
TAKERU-YAMATO
異議あり!
皐月君、反対尋問を

影野英治――生態不明の私立探偵。
あたしは乙女のたしなみの一つである
尾行術を駆使して彼の後を追った。
〝偉大なる諜報機関～KGB大図解～〟
という本で最近覚えたのだ。
ナ
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愛

Tactical Judgment Vol SS1: Descent of the Crimson Supernova!

By Toru Shiwasu

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「精錬潔白でまじめな人を買うことはできるか？」
「買うことはできないけど、売ることなら簡単よ！」

"Can you buy a person who is pure, honest, and serious?"

"You can't buy them, but selling them is easy!"

壊(こわ)れた時計で
もうける方法？

How to Profit from a Broken Watch?

"Um... excuse me..."

"...Huh?"

A quiet residential neighborhood. Even within this area, it was a strangely deserted alleyway.

The one who stopped me was a girl wearing a blazer school uniform.

At a glance, she seemed to be about a middle school student. She had a petite build, but with her silky hair down to her shoulders and her wide, sparkling eyes, she gave off an impression of being quite lively. However, perhaps because she was doing something she wasn't used to, she looked a bit hesitant. Or maybe she was intentionally pretending to act timid.

She must like red. A red strap hung from the bag in her hand, and she wore a red watch on her wrist.

I didn't particularly feel any interest in a kid like this, but if you looked for guys who had a thing for this kind of stuff, you could probably gather a fair number.

The girl, looking up at me almost as if trying to seduce me, said,

"Could you take this watch off my hands?"

Three hours earlier, at the Yamashika Law Office I run—

My name is Zenko Yamashika. It may sound a bit conceited to say it myself, but once I step into the courtroom, I'm a lawyer who doesn't know defeat.

The undefeated lawyer. That one phrase is more than enough to describe me.

The office has a low table for clients, with two sofas facing each other across it.

On one of the sofas sat a man with a bad look in his eyes, sitting cross-legged in a rude manner.

Private detective, Eiji Kageno. His long hair, which he barely takes care of, his unfashionable and somber clothing completely out of touch with trends, and a face so devoid of expression that even a small child would likely burst into tears upon seeing him. We were classmates in high school. Though he's a year older than me.

"Why did you become a detective?"

I asked.

"Because there's no boss."

He answered immediately. He's the kind of guy who'd be called a "socially maladjusted bum detective." That one phrase is more than enough to describe him.

As Kageno reached into his chest pocket to pull out a cigarette and a one dollar lighter, I casually hid the cheap ashtray on the table behind my back.

"...Hey."

The socially maladjusted bum detective stopped as he brought the cigarette to his mouth, and glared at me with his expressionless face.

"My law office is non-smoking."

"...Then why do you have an ashtray out?"

"It's for appearances. This is still a client-facing business."

Kageno sighed and said,

"You should start smoking too. It could give you something to sue the tobacco companies for in the future."

"I'll pass. It's bad for your health."

"If you won't smoke, at least give me some booze. It's not like you've got any clients coming to this run-down law office anyway."

"I'm not giving you any alcohol. It's bad for your health."

"...Then at least get a pretty secretary in here. It's too gloomy in a law office run by one guy."

"I'm not that desperate."

Kageno sighed again and scratched his messy hair.

"No smoking, no drinking, no women. What do you live for?"

"That's obvious."

I answered without hesitation.

"For telling lies."

"...Classic lawyer. You probably don't even know where the lies end anymore."

He barged into my office for no better reason than "I was bored," and he still had the nerve to throw insults at me.

Just then, there was a knock at the front door. Before I could respond, the door opened on its own, and in walked a man in a suit, with a face that looked like he was perpetually annoyed. He looked to be in his forties—your typical middle-aged man.

"...Ugh."

Unconsciously, I let out a groan upon seeing him. But the visitor wasn't the kind to be offended by something like that.

Hiroto Takeda. Vice President of the local bar association I belong to. Thanks to a case we worked together on in the past, he's also somewhat acquainted with Kageno. His hair was neatly parted down the middle, showing off an unusually wide forehead. He wore glasses that practically screamed, "I'm a serious person." He wasn't as tall as us, but he was of decent height, and despite being middle-aged, he had no signs of a beer belly or anything of the sort.

"Two young men huddled together in a tiny room in the middle of the day... Honestly, the future of this country seems bleak."

"It's thanks to the fine education of you older folks."

"Agreed."

Kageno chimed in.

...Not that I cared, but I really didn't appreciate the implication that I was having some kind of secret meeting with this guy.

"You two never shut up. If I could, I'd send brats like you back to elementary school to be re-educated, but that would probably corrupt the innocent kids there. Anyway, Yamashika, you troublesome lawyer, I've got a job for you. You're starting right now."

"No way."

"...Are you a child?"

"It's just going to be some boring civil case, isn't it? I'm only interested in criminal trials. You go your way, I'll go mine."

I'm not bragging, but at the young age of twenty-three, I've already been working as a lawyer, and I've repeatedly won acquittals in criminal cases.

Acquittals. That word has a nice ring to it, and there aren't many lawyers in Japan who can say they've heard it as often as I have.

"That's no excuse to dump all your divorce and inheritance cases on me. You need to do some real work too, instead of picking and choosing."

Takeda was so worked up that he was practically out of breath.

"Anyway, you're taking this job. If you don't solve it, you'll be disbarred for sure this time. Keep that in mind."

"Hey, old man. Sure, I may be a bit picky about the cases I take, but disbarring me for that would be a violation of my basic human rights. Besides, I'm doing my job properly in criminal trials."

"Article 1, Section 2 of the Attorney Act!"

Takeda shouted.

"'An attorney shall perform his or her duties with sincerity, and strive to maintain social order and improve legal systems!' You're clearly in violation of this basic principle!"

"No doubt about it."

Kageno nodded without hesitation.

"Ugh..."

I couldn't exactly argue when he brought that up.

What can you do. It's true that I've been dodging civil cases by making up excuses and passing them on to others. It seems the bill for that has finally come due...

"...What kind of case is it?"

I couldn't afford to be disbarred, so I admitted defeat.

"There's a girl selling fake luxury watches to random passersby on the street."

"What's she like?"

"She's a girl in a school uniform. Probably a middle schooler. I don't know her name."

...The world's really going downhill.

"I went to see her myself after hearing the story. And I'm not joking, she tried to sell me a watch right then and there. To be honest, she's so obvious, she couldn't sell a single one even if she approached a hundred people. The way she acts and the watches themselves are both clearly fake."

Takeda paused for a moment, then added,

"But it seems she's serious about trying to sell them."

"...And what do you want me to do?"

I still wasn't getting the point. Takeda shrugged in exasperation.

"Even though it's a joke to everyone else, it's becoming a bit of a local spectacle. Since no one's actually filed a complaint, the police aren't doing anything. But regardless of how people view it, she's still selling fake luxury watches without a permit.

This is a direct order from the president himself. He said you should take care of it before it turns into some kind of incident."

"..."

I imagined the overly kind president laughing with his peculiar "ho-ho-ho" while giving Takeda his instructions, and I couldn't help but feel exasperated.

"...Why me?"

"Because I told him you're the perfect idle lawyer for this job."

"No doubt about it."

Before I could protest, Kageno added an unnecessary comment.

...It's sad that I couldn't openly deny it. After all, murder cases, which are my specialty, don't exactly happen that often. Unfortunately.

"The location where the girl is selling her goods is written on this memo. Now, hurry up and go deal with it. If you fail, you're getting disbarred!"

Takeda slammed a memo down on the table and, as if his business was finished, stormed out of the office.

I had no choice but to pick up the memo and stand up.

"Sigh. No two ways about it, let's go, Kageno."

"...Why me too?"

I decided to ignore his protest. I wasn't kind enough to let him laze around in the office while I was sweating and working.

Three hours later—

"Could you take this watch off my hands?"

And that's how I ended up face to face with this girl.

In the girl's hand was a wristwatch encased in plastic.

A bulky design, with a belt that gleamed silver. At first glance, it looked like a fairly luxurious wristwatch.

"Hmm...?"

I didn't particularly need a wristwatch. I was already wearing a Rolex. Still, at a glance, it didn't look as awful as the old man Takeda had described.

I leaned in closer to get a better look at the watch in the case.

"..."

However, as I leaned in, the girl, with subtle movements, pulled the watch further away.

"...?"

I leaned forward slightly.

The girl took half a step back.

When I pulled back, she took half a step forward.

"...Hey."

"Eh!? W-What is it?"

Her voice cracked slightly.

"Why do you pull it away when I try to get a better look?"

"Uh, well, um, I'd hate it if you grabbed it and ran off..."

"..."

I see. Just as Takeda had said.

If it were an ordinary person, they'd have gotten suspicious by now and hurried away to their destination.

"...Well, whatever. You're looking for someone to take it, right? I'll take it off your hands. It's free, right?"

I reached out to take the watch, but the girl, as soon as I got close, pulled it away again.

"Uh, um, well, I mean...

I can't exactly give it away for free..."

"..."

I reached into my pocket and pressed whatever I grabbed into her hand.

The girl opened her hand with a puzzled look.

"One dollar and twenty cents!? Th-that's a little... I mean, this is kind of..."

"That's enough for bus fare or train fare, isn't it?"

Though she forced a smile, I didn't miss the way her cheek occasionally twitched.

"U-Um, if you could give a little more, though..."

"...How much, then?"

"I'd be really, really happy if you could give me around 65 dollars...

Or maybe just a little more, if possible."

Her suspicious behavior and the dubious product.

Honestly, I couldn't imagine anyone paying 65 dollars to buy a watch from a middle school kid in a uniform. ...Well, that's probably why she's been left alone as a harmless joke until now.

"S-See, here, look at this!"

Maybe she thought I was losing interest because she flipped the case over. Tucked inside was a card, with rows of English text written on it. The heading read:

"ROLEX."

I could more or less grasp the gist of the description below it. It certified that this Rolex watch was made in Switzerland, and so on. There was even a fancy-looking stamp on it.

I remembered that my own Rolex came with a similar certificate. I see, her behavior was certainly suspicious, but maybe she really was trying to sell a genuine luxury watch at a bargain price.

"See? It's a real Rolex, isn't it? For 65 dollars, it's a great deal!"

"...Weren't you looking for someone to take it off your hands, not a buyer?"

"U, uh, well, y'know, I think people shouldn't live tied to the past, but rather always move forward creatively toward the future! So, how about 100 dollars?"

"Why's the price going up?"

"I just made a creative leap forward!"

"..."

"F-fine! How about I cut it down to 80 dollars?"

Maybe she thought I wasn't planning to buy it, because she hastily blurted it out.

"Are you even listening to what I'm saying?"

"Then 65 dollars!"

"Why is a middle schooler like you selling a Rolex in the first place?"

"How about 50 dollars!?"

"...You're not listening to me, are you?"

"Fine! Fine! I'll drop it to 40 dollars, okay!?"

"...Nope, you're definitely not listening."

"30 dollars! That's as low as I can go!"

I let out an exaggerated sigh. It seemed reasoning with this kid was pointless.

That said, if I wanted to go through with the plan Kageno and I came up with as a way to kill time, I had no choice but to buy this watch. I pulled out my wallet from the inside pocket of my suit.

"...Alright, I'll buy it."

"Yay! That's more like it!"

The girl flashed me a beaming sales smile as she handed me the case.

...And that's when I saw it. I saw her slyly slip the so-called "ROLEX" certificate out of the case.

What's more, I noticed that the edges of the plastic card were all scratched up, as if it had been taken in and out of the case countless times.

Five minutes later.

I watched the girl, who was clutching her dollar bills, skipping away. In one hand, I held the case with the watch. I pulled out my phone and contacted Kageno.

'Is it time?'

"Yeah. It's your turn now, with your specialty: stalking. Make sure you follow her closely. Don't worry, if you get arrested under anti-stalking laws, I'll defend you. My fee is 20 dollars an hour. You'll have to pay your own bail, though."

'...At least call it tailing.'

Before sunset, Kageno returned to my office.

My law office is located in a slightly off-center commercial district of the town. It's in a somewhat old four-story building. The corner of the second floor is both my law office and my home.

There are two rooms, each the size of a small studio. One is the office, also used for receiving clients, where I have my work desk, sofas, and bookshelves.

The other room is entirely my personal space. I do have an apartment elsewhere, but it's a hassle to go back there, so I've set up a bed and closet here and stay overnight. With gas and water available, there's no issue living here.

"So, this is the watch, huh?"

Kageno held the watch up and examined it in the light streaming through the window.

It gleamed silver under the sunlight.

Except, when he scratched it with his nail, the shine came right off.

It felt weighty in the hand, giving off a solid impression.

It was only natural—when we opened it up, we found it filled with lead.

The most surprising part was the strap. For some reason, once you put it on, you couldn't take it off again.

To top it off, the watch didn't even work. We tried to change the battery, but there wasn't even a place to put one.

It was the kind of flashy, purely decorative wristwatch you sometimes find in those crane games.

In short, I had shelled out 30 dollars for a watch that wasn't even worth one buck.

"So, did you find out where that brat lives?"

I asked, and Kageno nodded with his expressionless face.

"Yeah. Her name's Iyo Satsuki. She lives in a single-family house in a neighborhood that's neither high-class nor low-class. However, from the place you met her, you'd have to transfer

trains to get there. It seems she's doing business on the sly, without her family or the locals knowing.

Her father is a perfectly ordinary office worker, her mother is a part-time housewife, also perfectly normal. She's got a younger brother. The neighbors don't have anything strange to say about the family. But I did hear some rumors that just the girl has recently gotten caught up in some weird customs or beliefs."

"Weird customs? Beliefs?"

What kind of middle school girl is this...?

"Whatever. Kageno, you know what to do tomorrow, right?"

"Yeah. I just need to sweet-talk her and bring her here, right?"

I had a feeling there was a bit of exaggeration in Kageno's words, but I couldn't be bothered to correct him.

The next day. A little past 3 PM. The weather was nice again today, with the spring sunshine pouring down on the streets. Looking down at the street from the office window, I saw, as usual, the perpetually irritated-looking Kageno, and with him, the girl, Iyo Satsuki.

Despite the fact that she was heading toward this slum-like building with a large, intimidating man like Kageno, Satsuki didn't seem the least bit intimidated. Considering she's involved in such shady business, I couldn't help but feel a certain amount of astonishment and disbelief toward this girl.

Soon, Satsuki, led by Kageno, stepped into the office. The moment she saw me, she grimaced.

"Ugh."

...What's with the "ugh"...?

She immediately turned to Kageno and said:

"You tricked me, didn't you!? What's this about 'some idiot who wants to buy a watch is looking for you'!?"

"Sorry, I misspoke. I should have said 'the idiot who already bought the watch is looking for you.'"

"..."

Ignoring Kageno's words, I turned my attention to the girl with the strange name, Satsuki.

She was screeching like a monkey, but Kageno grabbed her arm and forcibly dragged her from the entrance and sat her down on the sofa in front of me. Kageno himself stood next to her, apparently intending to stay by her side.

"Iyo Satsuki, right? Your family consists of four people, including your younger brother. That's correct, isn't it?"

Satsuki's expression twitched slightly, but she quickly crossed her arms and legs, despite wearing a short skirt, and tried her best to appear tough.

"Heh, heh~. So, you've got it all figured out, huh? That's right, I'm Satsuki. Iyo Satsuki! Cool name, right?"

"Maybe."

...It's definitely a better name than mine, Zenko Yamashika. Between my idiot father, who gave me such a pretentious name as "Zenko" (meaning "good deeds"), and my ancestors who came up with the surname "Yamashika" (meaning "mountain deer"), I've always wanted to protest against my family's naming sense from the bottom of my heart.

"At least it's better than 'Zenko Umashika', as in 'mountain horse'."

The one who always laughed and made fun of me with that line was some hack detective from somewhere...

"So, what do you want!? You're a lawyer, right? I really didn't want to have anything to do with lawyers who've been corrupted by capitalism!"

Realizing she couldn't escape, she had adopted a defiant attitude, speaking boldly. ...Though she did throw in some complaints that seemed a bit out of place for a middle schooler.

Is it trendy for middle schoolers these days to criticize people by bringing up capitalism?

I thrust the non-functioning watch, with its peeling silver plating, in front of her face.

"What do I want? Ask yourself. You should have an idea. You tried to sell me this fake watch."

"Ugh."

It seemed she understood why I'd called her here. She glared at me and the watch with resentment.

"Anyway, I want a refund."

"Hmph, I don't have any money to give back to you! I showed you the product thoroughly, and I never said a word about how much it was worth! You're the one who willingly paid 30 dollars for it, so I haven't done anything wrong!"

She didn't seem to understand the absurdity of trying to scam a lawyer with street-side fraud.

"Listen, you said this was a watch. That's correct, isn't it? But as you can see, this watch doesn't work.

True, you didn't say anything about its value. But you claimed you were selling a watch, knowing full well that it didn't function as one, didn't you?

Do you know what people generally call a watch that can't tell time?"

"..."

"Junk."

"Ugh..."

The sharp look Satsuki had been giving me earlier suddenly shifted, and she looked away from me.

"In other words, you sold me junk, claiming it was a watch, and charged me 30 dollars for it. Do you know what people call that kind of act?"

"W-What...?"

"In legal terms, it's called 'breach of contract.' In simpler terms, it's fraud."

"Ugh..."

"And that's not all. You showed me a Rolex certificate when you sold me the watch. That made me think this was a Rolex and convinced me to give you 30 dollars. Let me show you what a real Rolex looks like."

I tossed the Rolex I was wearing onto the desk. Satsuki picked it up and, with a slightly stiff expression, said:

"...Heh, heh~. It's a little higher quality, I guess. But the watch I gave you is a pretty close match."

'In what universe?'

Kageno and I responded in perfect harmony.

"Well, maybe it's a bit better quality. But hey, aren't you getting hungry by now?"

"Don't change the subject! Don't pocket the watch! And don't act like nothing's happening!"

When I said this, Satsuki clicked her tongue and said:

"...You're such a petty man. Fine, fine. I'll return it, okay!?"

Grumbling all the while, she pulled the watch out of her pocket and placed it back on the table.

"Alright, I'll say it like a lawyer. Civil Code Article 415 states that when there is a breach of contract, the party at fault is responsible for compensating damages. You've got two options. Either give me a properly functioning Rolex, as guaranteed by the certificate, or apologize and return the 30 dollars. Otherwise, I'll report you to the police for fraud and sue you for damages."

Satsuki seemed to catch her breath for a moment at my words, but she quickly regained her defiant posture.

"F-Fine, do it if you think you can!"

"Okay."

Without hesitation, I pulled out my cell phone and started dialing the police number, making sure Satsuki could see.

"Wait! Wait, stop! Stop it!"

She fell for the bluff. In the end, a kid is still just a kid.

I pretended to be annoyed as I spoke.

"...What?"

"I-I was joking! Fine, fine, I'll give it back, okay!?"

Satsuki pulled a wallet from her bag, quickly took out bills for 30 dollars, and placed them on the desk.

"There! Happy now!? I'm leaving once we're done here!"

"Nope, not yet."

I said in a low, intimidating voice, causing Satsuki's face to twitch.

"...W-What now?"

"I had to hire a detective to find out where you live, and you've wasted my work hours. I'm entitled to charge you for that. Let's say 20 dollars should cover it."

"There's no way I can pay that!"

Just as I expected.

To fulfill the request I'd taken on from old man Takeda, I glanced at Kageno, who had been silently observing the situation. Kageno grinned and, in his usual emotionless voice, said:

"Then we'll have to settle this with your body."

Satsuki stared at Kageno in shock.

I immediately followed up.

"Yeah, you're just a kid, but a girl's still a girl. You'll be of some use."

"E-Eh!?"

Apparently, Satsuki had misunderstood our gazes and imagined something improper. She hurriedly tried to pull down the hem of her short skirt.

I slowly stood up, looming over her, as if to intimidate her.

Both Kageno and I are over 5'11 tall. To this girl, who looks like she's barely 4'11, we must look pretty intimidating.

"H-Hold on! What are you planning to do? I'll scream! I'll report you to the police! I'll run to child services!"

"Relax, this is still an office building. The soundproofing is solid, and the police won't listen to a scammer like you anyway."

"Eep..."

Satsuki, sensing an ominous atmosphere that wasn't really there, let out a weird shriek and tried to jump up from the sofa. But her attempt was futile, as Kageno, standing behind her, firmly pressed down on her shoulders.

"Well, you reap what you sow."

Saying that, I moved to stand in front of Satsuki. A self-mocking smirk crept onto my face as I prepared to do what I was about to do.

"N-No, no! Stop it, please!"

Satsuki thrashed about desperately, trying to resist.

But there was no escaping from Kageno.

"Somebody, help me! Someone, please!"

"Come on, you tried to scam someone. You must have known you'd end up in a situation like this, right?"

I said this as I grabbed her small chin. Tears began to well up at the corners of her eyes.

"Please, stop... Just stop..."

"Calm down. You know, sometimes in life, you just have to give up."

This time, Kageno leaned in and whispered in her ear in a frighteningly monotone voice. This guy would definitely be better suited to working as a debt collector for a loan shark than as a detective.

It seemed effective, as Satsuki's cries of "no, no!" grew even louder.

Being in an office building, the soundproofing was indeed good. But if, by some chance, someone were to hear those screams, I'd be at risk of losing my lawyer's license.

"Kageno, that's enough."

"Yeah, okay."

Kageno released her shoulders without hesitation, and I also stepped back, returning to my seat on the sofa.

"...?"

With faint tears still in her eyes, Satsuki looked around in confusion as she adjusted her disheveled clothes, which she had messed up herself in her panic.

"Have you learned your lesson?"

"Y-You tricked me!?"

"Just because you're a girl doesn't mean I'm desperate enough to lust after some brat."

"...!!"

Satsuki rubbed her eyes with her hands, and in an instant, her face flushed red.

"You're the worst! An enemy of women! You're a monster! I hope you and all the other capitalist pigs suffer under the police state forever! I'll report you for trying to do something weird to me!"

...Her threats were a bit hard to follow.

"Do whatever you want. But don't forget that you violated Article 415 of the Civil Code. If you go to the police, they'll also find out you committed fraud."

"Ugh..."

It's tragic when someone doesn't realize how pointless it is to threaten a lawyer with "I'll report you."

"While we're at it, let me ask you something. Did you have any kind of permit to sell goods on the street?"

"..."

Satsuki fell silent, with a confused look on her face, as if she had no idea what I was talking about.

"Thought so. You should be glad you ran into nice guys like us. If you'd kept doing it, eventually the yakuza would've shown up and demanded protection money."

"P-Protection money?"

"Think of it as rent for operating in their territory. You've heard stories about yakuza extorting money from people, right?

And of course, since you wouldn't be able to pay, they'd catch you and do some things that I can't even mention. After that, they'd probably sell you into a shady business for minors, and that'd be the end of your life in the outside world."

"..."

Of course, with the recent increase in crackdowns, it's unlikely something like that would actually happen these days. But I kept that to myself.

Even this small lie seemed to be enough to have an effect on Satsuki, as she now wore a slightly more serious expression.

"Do you understand now how dangerous what you were doing was? If you've learned your lesson, don't even think about selling fake watches again."

"…I understand."

She spat the words out.

Finally, it seemed this job was over. I shrugged at Kageno, who responded with a yawn.

"So, what were you planning to do with all that money anyway? Buying up brand-name goods or something?"

Kageno asked Satsuki.

Suddenly, Satsuki's face turned red with anger, and she shouted:

"Why would I waste money on something so stupid!? Don't lump me in with ordinary girls!"

"Then what were you going to use it for?"

Kageno asked again.

"My goal for raising money is one thing—"

The next words that came out of Satsuki's mouth were far beyond anything Kageno or I could have imagined.

"—To fund the revolution for communism!"

"..."

"..."

"Ever since I entered middle school, I've been reading Lenin and Mao Zedong!

Ah, communism! Do you understand how wonderful that ideology is!? Humanity should collectivize all wealth, and only then will the economic disparities across the world disappear, and poverty will be eradicated. The reckless development that's destroying our planet can be solved in no time!

Oh, Chairman Mao! Why did you have to leave this world by the time I was born!? If it were for your ideals, I'd gladly give up my entire life!"

As Satsuki passionately delivered her speech, I could almost see a red flag embroidered with a sickle and hammer waving behind her. Or perhaps it was a red flag with five stars.

"...Are you serious?"

I could only force the words out.

"Of course I am! Don't you see? The world today is heading in the wrong direction! Chairman Mao's ideals have been twisted by capitalist pigs, and the world is going astray! The only solution left is to embrace communism!"

I decided to feel genuine sympathy for Mao Zedong, who had managed to gain such a fervent follower.

"I get it, I get it. You've been brainwashed by those capitalist scum who taught you the wrong version of communism!"

"..."

I was proud of my ability to argue, especially in criminal trials. My specialty was defending in tough cases, like murder trials. I'd proven the innocence of many falsely accused individuals and wiped the smug looks off the faces of prosecutors who treated all suspects as criminals.

But right now, I was being overwhelmed—by this girl, who was nearly ten years younger than me.

"Oh, look at the time!"

Suddenly, Satsuki glanced at her wristwatch. It looked like a typical watch that a girl would like, but for some reason, the fact that it was red gave me a strange impression.

"I'd love to teach you all about communism right now, but at home and school, I'm known as a bright and proper young lady. So, I'm going to head home for today. But don't worry, I'll give you another valuable lecture next time! See you later!"

With that, she waved her hand, spun around, and quickly left my office. Kageno and I were so taken aback by everything that we couldn't even say a word.

About thirty seconds later, Kageno spoke.

"Hey, Yamashika."

"...Don't say anything. Not now."

"..."

I sighed and shook my head.

"Man, what the hell are they teaching kids in schools these days...?"

Grumbling, I reached for the Rolex that had been left on the table, about to put it back on—when I realized something.

"...Oh."

The words slipped out of my mouth before I could stop them.

"What is it now, Yamashika? Why the dumb look?"

"The watch... She switched it."

And that was how I ended up meeting the little brat named Iyo Satsuki. You could say it was the beginning of my bad luck.

(How to Profit from a Broken Watch? — End)

チエスで十倍
もうける方法？

How to Make 10 Times More Money with Chess?

It happened at an antique shop I wandered into on my way home from school.

Why would a radiant beauty like me be in such a musty and out-of-place shop, you ask? Let me just clarify: I have no impure motives like finding some hidden treasure among the junk, buying it cheap, and then reselling it for a huge profit.

It's just that even in a shabby place like this, there's a chance that something incredibly valuable might be lying around. If such a valuable item exists, unnoticed by anyone, it would be a loss for humanity.

The reason I'm here is because I want to find those kinds of items and return them to their rightful place. Just as beautiful ideas should always be cherished by the right people, valuable works of art should also be loved by those who understand their worth.

Of course, I'll take a little finder's fee, but it's not like I'm going to use it for myself. I'm saving it to help realize my ideals of world peace for the next millennium.

...No, really, just a little bit.

Inside the shop, there are old paintings, statues, and ornaments scattered about. It feels more like a slightly organized storage room than a shop. At first glance, it's certainly a shabby place, but I'm sure there's a hidden gem somewhere in here.

But sadly, I haven't found anything that catches my eye yet.

"Looking for something, miss?"

It must've been rare for a beautiful girl in a school uniform like me to be in a place like this, as the elderly man who seemed to be the owner suddenly spoke to me.

"Just browsing. I'm looking for something I could submit to an antique appraisal show. Hey, do you have anything that's cheap but could sell for a lot to collectors?"

"My, you're an honest girl, aren't you?"

The old man chuckled and said, "How about this?" as he pulled out a few small items that even a middle schooler like me could afford.

They could all be described as "cute" or "pretty." But while they might appeal to an ordinary middle school girl, none of them aligned with my lofty goals. Still, since he was being kind

enough to explain them to me, I couldn't just brush him off rudely. So, I nodded along appropriately while continuing to browse the store.

Suddenly, my eyes landed on something displayed in the corner of the shop.

A chess set.

The pieces had an antique feel, as if they were screaming, "I'm a valuable relic!" But the thirty-two pieces, white and black, were all intricately crafted, adorned with jewels, and despite their antique nature, they exuded a certain elegance.

I picked up one of the pieces, which appeared to be the Queen. It glistened under the dim light of the shop. My sixth sense tingled. This is it. This is the one!

Suppressing my inner excitement, I asked the old man.

"Hey, hey, old man, what's this?"

"Hmm? That? As you can see, it's a chess set. They say it was made by order of a king of the Ottoman Empire a long time ago. I can't say for sure whether that's true, though."

"Wow. Hey, how much is this?"

"Let's see. I'd say it's around 350 dollars."

"350 dollars!? Even though it's got such beautiful jewels embedded in it!?"

"Oh, I should mention, those jewels are fake. They're just colored glass."

When I heard that, I let out a sigh of relief.

"But still, the pieces themselves are made of ivory, and as you can see, the carvings are intricate. There's no doubt that it's an old piece, and I'm sure a collector would pay around 350 dollars for it. But, it might be a bit expensive for a young lady like you."

The old man chuckled. Of course, no ordinary middle school girl could afford to pay 350 dollars for something like this.

However. I'm no ordinary middle schooler.

"How about we trade for this?"

I pulled a watch out of my bag. The old man's eyes widened in surprise when he saw it.

"I-Isn't that a Rolex!? Where did you get something like this?"

I wagged my finger and winked.

"I f-o-u-n-d i-t ♪"

On a certain day, at a certain time, at Yamashika Law Office

Lately, Japan has been in a recession, but it seems relatively peaceful. As I sat at my desk at work, reading the morning paper, I found myself thinking that.

This kind of situation is incredibly boring for a lawyer like me. There's hardly any decent work coming in.

Of course, there's a never-ending stream of cases that could keep a lawyer busy, like people wanting to divorce their spouses, being swindled by loan sharks, or getting into drunken brawls.

But the cases I take on have to be filled with thrills and suspense. Like, say, a murder case.

However, lately, even when there is a murder, either the culprit isn't found, or they're caught but confess immediately, leaving no room for me to step in.

If only there were more regular occurrences of unfortunate people being wrongly accused of serious crimes, then I wouldn't have to worry about work—thinking like that makes me painfully aware of how corrupt my profession as a lawyer really is these days.

At that moment, while I was lost in such unproductive thoughts, the office door suddenly burst open with a loud bang.

"Heh, heh, heh, heh..."

The bratty little girl, Iyo Satsuki, wearing her blazer school uniform and holding a student bag in one hand, strutted into my office with a smug grin, as if she was about to say something truly amazing, and puffed out her flat chest.

A bad feeling washed over me.

I decided to pretend I hadn't seen her at the entrance and continued reading my morning paper. Noticing she was being completely ignored, Satsuki's lips curved downward into a pout.

By the way, there was another person in the office—a self-proclaimed private detective, an outsider, lying on the sofa, napping away. Despite my repeated warnings that the sofa was for clients, he'd never once listened.

Satsuki glared at me with an expression that was far from friendly.

"...Hey. You."

"What's this? Giving honorary residency to this 'Tama-chan the seal'? Who the hell came up with such a pointless idea...?"

"Hey! Don't ignore me! Hey, I'm talking to you!"

This time, she came right up to me and tugged insistently on my sleeve. Hey, you're going to stretch it.

But if I gave in and dealt with this brat now, there was no telling what kind of nonsense she'd spout next. The best course of action was to ignore her.

"Hey, hey, I'm talking to you!"

"What's this? Someone ate two hundred bowls of wanko soba and set a new record? What kind of stomach do they have...?"

Satsuki, seeing that I was still stubbornly ignoring her, puffed out her cheeks in frustration.

"Hmph! So that's how you're going to act, huh? Well, I've got my own plan! Take this!"

Satsuki reached out and tried to snatch the newspaper from my hands. But since I had a firm grip on it, her attempt failed immediately. However.

Newspapers are fragile things. When pressure is applied from different directions, they quickly tear with a loud ripping sound, turning into a pile of shredded paper.

"Ah."

Satsuki let out a startled cry, but there wasn't a hint of regret or remorse in her expression.

Evil, darkness, a personification of sin. Something that leads people down the wrong path and brings about their destruction. People define and scorn such things by calling them "demons."

This brat may still be a middle schooler, lacking in concrete power like wealth or influence. But because of that, I'll call her this:

"What the hell do you think you're doing, you little demon! I'll sue you for causing a disturbance and for property damage!"

"Who are you calling a demon!?"

"Who else but you!? You shredded my newspaper! Pay me back! Fifty cents!"

"What a petty man! What's fifty cents, anyway?"

"Who are you to talk when you're the one who tore it up!?"

And at that moment.

"...Noisy as hell. Can't even take a nap in peace in this law office?"

The man who had been sleeping on the sofa muttered something that made one question the very purpose of this office.

Eiji Kageno. His profession, self-proclaimed private detective, might as well be synonymous with words like "bum" or "vagrant" in his case. He always looked sleepy and irritable, but it wasn't because he had just woken up. It was simply his nature.

Kageno glanced back and forth between Satsuki and me, then yawned in boredom.

"So, the little demon's paying a visit, huh?"

"D-Don't say weird things! How am I, a well-behaved, elegant beauty, any kind of demon!?"

I quickly cut in.

"You barged into someone's office without permission and tore up the newspaper he was reading. No one's calling that well-behaved."

"Humph."

The little demon furrowed her brow, but then, as if suddenly deciding to embrace it, she flashed a bright smile.

"Well, whatever. There's no reason to get mad about being called a demon by a bunch of villains, right?"

"Can't argue with that."

Kageno gave a half-hearted nod.

I considered retorting with a "who are you calling a villain?" but realized there was no reason to get upset about being called a villain by a little demon, so I kept quiet.

"Anyway, enough of that. Listen to me for a second!"

In the end, my attempt to ignore her was about to fail miserably.

I really didn't want to listen to the nonsense of this little demon. Whenever she started talking, it always ended up dragging me into some kind of trouble.

However, if I were to say "No" right now... my peaceful afternoon would undoubtedly be entirely consumed by this little demon's endless complaints.

There was no way I could call the police and claim self-defense against a middle schooler, so I had no choice but to ask:

"...What happened?"

I had a terrible feeling that this simple question was about to lead to an enormous headache. Meanwhile, Satsuki, in contrast, started speaking with great confidence.

"Do you know Tamasaburo Gonda?"

"Nope."

I answered immediately, feeling a twinge of sympathy for the man.

Tamasaburo Gonda. What a terrible name. Compared to that, my own name doesn't seem so bad.

"I've heard of him."

The one who responded was Kageno, who was still lying lazily on the sofa.

"He's a city council member with a reputation for shady dealings behind the scenes. Leaking the estimated bid prices for public works projects, prioritizing public contracts for a construction company run by his relatives, stuff like that."

In short, a corrupt politician.

"Exactly! That Tamasaburo Gonda! And that man—"

"Turned out to be your father? Well, that explains a lot."

"W-Who the hell would be the daughter of that kind of guy!? Keep quiet, you con-man lawyer!"

A con-man lawyer? Me?

The undefeated, unrivaled, peerless lawyer who wins every case in the courtroom, being called a con-man? How bold.

But before I could retort, Satsuki kept talking without giving me a chance to interrupt.

"And despite all those shady rumors about him, the police aren't even trying to arrest that guy! Isn't that totally suspicious!?"

"It's only natural that the police aren't moving. If people could be arrested based on rumors alone, the entire justice system would collapse."

Of course, Satsuki wasn't about to listen to such logic.

"Where there's smoke, there's fire! If there are three bad rumors about someone, that person's definitely a villain!"

Even if I explained to her the basic principle that people are presumed innocent until proven guilty in court, it would be like talking to a brick wall.

As a decent lawyer, I felt a certain duty to guide her down the right path, but I ultimately decided to feign temporary deafness.

"Anyway! Letting scum like that, who thrive on capitalism, run free goes against my principles! That's why, as the rightful successor to the great Chairman Mao's ideals, I delivered divine punishment to him!"

"...Divine punishment?"

And a very personal kind, no doubt.

If my memory serves me correctly, the law in this country prohibits any form of vigilante justice. My sense of foreboding only grew stronger.

"...What did you do?"

Completely ignoring my concern, Satsuki let out a mischievous laugh.

"I sold him a chess set I bought for 350 dollars... for 3500 dollars!"

The word "fraud" flashed across my mind for an instant, and at the same time, a flood of questions arose. A chess set worth 350 dollars? Sold for 3500 dollars? None of this made any sense.

"A chess set that costs 350 dollars?"

"It's apparently some set made by a king in Turkey or somewhere ages ago. All thirty-two pieces are beautifully decorated."

"Why would a kid like you be able to buy something worth 350 dollars?"

"Heh. I traded it for the watch you gave me."

I slammed my hands on the desk.

"What!? You traded that Rolex!? You stole that from me, didn't you!? Give it back! Pay me back!"

But Satsuki, waving her hand dismissively, said:

"Don't worry, don't worry. I'll get three grand soon enough. I'll even give you 150 dollars."

"Well, in that case, fine."

"...Is that really okay?"

Kageno asked, sounding somewhat dumbfounded, but I chose to ignore him.

"But how did a kid like you manage to close such a deal?"

"It was easy! There's this thing called online auctions nowadays. I started the bidding at 350 dollars, and the price quickly started rising. Then, when it hit around seventy thousand, I suddenly got an email from someone asking to buy it outright for 600 dollars. Turns out it was from some guy who works for Gonda! So I looked into this Gonda guy, and he's, like, a total villain, right? So I replied, saying I realized the chess set was worth a lot more than 600 dollars, and I wouldn't sell it for that. Then I strung him along by sending new photos and stuff, and eventually, the price went up to 3500."

...No way. In what world would anyone throw down three grand for a chess set they've never even held? As expected, Kageno looked at Satsuki in disbelief.

But Satsuki, completely unfazed by our doubts, continued on, eyes sparkling.

"The money's supposed to be transferred tomorrow, so look forward to it!"

It was a bizarre story. A city councilman willing to fork over three grand.

But that was as far as my thoughts went. I had heard that online auctions usually required payment upfront. If that's the case, Satsuki, as the seller, wouldn't be the one getting scammed. And if she actually managed to sell it for 3500 dollars, 150 of that would come back to me. If that happened, I'd have no complaints.

At least, that's what I thought at the time.

Two days after Satsuki told me about her strange deal, the phone suddenly rang.

Just like the past two days, there hadn't been any significant cases, and my law office was practically in a state of suspended animation. As I picked up the phone, I couldn't help but hope that it was a call from someone wrongly accused of murder.

"Hello, this is Yamashika Law Office."

"Zenko, help me—"

Click. I hung up the phone.

The social misfit detective lounging on the client sofa looked at me curiously.

"Who was that, Yamashika?"

"A prank call."

"Yeah, you probably make a lot of enemies."

"Humph."

Just as I was about to counter Kageno's baseless slander, the phone rang again. This time, I decided to let it ring. Kageno tilted his head curiously.

"Aren't you going to answer that?"

"It's just a prank call."

"Could it be Satsuki?"

"Ugh."

For someone who usually seemed so dull, he could be strangely sharp at times. Seeing my reaction, Kageno smirked.

"You better answer it. She probably knows you're there. That brat will keep calling until you pick up."

"…Ugh."

He was right. That little demon was definitely capable of it. Sure enough, the phone showed no signs of stopping.

I reluctantly picked up the receiver.

"…Hello?"

"Hey, Zenko! You hung up on me earlier, didn't you!? What were you thinking, hanging up on a call from a beautiful girl like me!?"

I felt an overwhelming urge to slam the receiver down again, but I managed to suppress that impulse, telling myself it was just to get the conversation over with.

"I don't care about that. Just get to the point. I'm busy."

"It's not something you can just brush off! When have you ever been busy, anyway—actually, that's not important right now. I'm passing the phone to someone else."

Before I could even process what she was saying, I heard the voice of a middle-aged man I didn't recognize.

"Are you this brat's lawyer?"

"…I have no idea what you're talking about. Who are you?"

"Hmph. I hear you're a lawyer, but barely in your twenties. Speaking to your elders like that—no manners at all. A lawyer like you for a brat like this, the world's really gone to hell."

I felt a surge of anger.

I didn't know who this jerk was, but there was no reason I had to endure such insults from a complete stranger.

"Answer my question. Who the hell are you?"

"Fine, I'll tell you. I am Tamasaburo Gonda, a city councilman."

"Oh, so you're him. I know all about you. They say you're a shameless crook who uses his position as a councilman to commit all sorts of crimes behind the scenes—dishonest, unethical, thoughtless, and totally immoral."

"W-What!? How dare you say such things to me!? If you think you can mock me without consequences, you've got another thing coming!"

"Oh, getting that worked up, huh? I guess the rumors aren't so far off the mark after all."

"Shut up, shut up! I'll have you know I have strong connections to the local bar association! Getting you disbarred would be a piece of cake!"

I thought about the faces of the top brass at the local bar association. The crafty president with his signature "ho-ho-ho" laugh, and the stubborn vice president.

"Go ahead, give it a try. File a complaint with the bar association, why don't you? But let me tell you, the lawyers around here don't bend over just because you're a city councilman. I'm telling you this for your own good, but the only people who'll follow your orders without question are the construction companies working under you. In places where your authority doesn't hold, not even kids are going to listen to you."

"S-Shut up! I won't tolerate any more insults! Fine, I'll get to the point. This brat swindled me out of money in an unfair deal! If you don't hand over all the chess pieces immediately, I'll report you to the police!"

Ah, so that's what this is about. As I suspected, Satsuki was the root of all this trouble.

"Where are you right now? We're not going to get anywhere talking like this over the phone. I'll come to you."

"Fine. It'll be amusing to watch you grovel on the ground, begging for my forgiveness."

That's my line, I thought, but it felt too cliché to say aloud. Instead, I silently got the man's location and slammed the receiver down.

"So, you're getting dragged into this mess after all."

Kageno was smirking. I spat out a response.

"I don't care if that brat ends up getting dragged to the police for this, but I'm not going to be satisfied until I wipe the smug grin off that dog of a politician's face."

Kageno shrugged.

"Poor city councilman. If only he'd taken a more humble approach, he could've avoided making an enemy out of the great Mr. Yamashika."

Ignoring Kageno's words, I grabbed my car keys and started to get ready to leave. For some reason, Kageno spoke up as if he were about to watch a comedy show.

"I think I'll tag along. I want to see how you plan to wipe that grin off his face."

"…You're just bored, aren't you?"

The place was as tasteless as it was extravagant.

Everything in sight, from the desk to the chairs, looked expensive. There were antique vases, paintings, and sculptures scattered everywhere. It looked like the kind of place that could become an art gallery with just a bit of effort.

I'd never heard of city council members making this much money. It seemed clear to me that most of the shady rumors about this guy were probably true.

Satsuki, in her school uniform, was seated on a luxurious sofa. Across from her, sipping coffee with a smug look on his face, sat a man with a bulging belly. This must be Tamasaburo Gonda. Standing next to him was another man, likely in his forties, who looked rather unremarkable.

I addressed the man who I assumed was Gonda, speaking directly.

"You're Tamasaburo Gonda?"

"Hold it right there! How dare you speak to Mr. Gonda like that!"

The man next to Gonda was the one who answered, but Gonda didn't seem to care.

"Hmph, not only your words but your attitude is disgraceful. You must be that rude lawyer, Yamashika."

Yep, this pompous tone confirmed it. This guy was definitely Gonda.

"You're late, Zenko! A beautiful girl like me was in danger, and you didn't rush over!? You should've gotten here sooner!"

Satsuki complained, as usual.

"…I could leave you here and go home, you know."

"A-Ah! W-Wait a minute!"

"Hmph, you're free to leave if you want."

Gonda sneered.

"A young punk like you probably can't do much more than bow your head and apologize, anyway."

"That's right, Mr. Gonda. Forget this lawyer—I say we call the girl's parents and make them pay compensation."

The man beside Gonda chimed in, and I immediately understood what kind of person he was.

"Hey! My parents have nothing to do with this! My lawyer's here, so talk to him!"

…Great. I mentally noted to send her a bill for my services later, and then I turned to the suck-up.

"By the way, who are you?"

My tone must have been too casual because the man looked irritated for a moment. But soon, he regained his composure and pulled out a business card from the inner pocket of his suit.

"I am this man," he said, pressing the card into my hand.

I glanced at the card, then looked back at him.

"…What?"

"What is it?"

"Nothing."

As expected, he was Gonda's secretary. That wasn't surprising. The problem was his name.

"I... Inasaku Yonedawara?"

From behind me, Kageno peeked at the card and muttered under his breath, just loud enough for me to hear.

"Good for you, Yamashika. At least your name's better than his."

Feeling a strange, mixed sense of satisfaction, I forced myself to turn back to Satsuki.

"So, what exactly happened?"

"Let me explain!"

According to Satsuki, it went something like this:

A few days ago, she made a deal to sell a chess set for 3500 dollars. The money was transferred to her account, and the product was delivered to Gonda without issue. So far, so good.

But when Gonda opened the package, he found that only twenty-five of the thirty-two pieces were there. Furious, he called Satsuki over, and Satsuki, equally upset, came to confront him. However, neither side could reach an agreement, so Satsuki decided to call me in as her legal representative.

I didn't want anything to do with representing Satsuki, but if this dragged out, the 150 dollars I was owed would go up in smoke.

Reluctantly, I decided to handle this case in a way befitting a lawyer.

"I see. So basically, you're claiming this brat didn't send the full set as promised. Therefore, you want the remaining pieces delivered, or a refund and an apology, correct?"

"Exactly. That's only natural."

"Hmph, that's not even worth discussing."

"W-What did you say!?"

"Listen, the kid says she sent the set in perfect condition. Doesn't that suggest another possibility? Maybe all the pieces were there when you received it, but someone, regretting the 3500 dollars they spent, hid a few pieces to make it seem like there was a problem with the deal."

Gonda's face flushed red.

"Y-You insolent fool! You think I'd go to such trouble just to avoid paying a mere 3500 dollars!? If you don't want the police involved, come up with a better excuse!"

Ignoring Gonda's outburst, I continued.

"Let me give you one piece of advice. You should call a lawyer instead of the police."

"Hmph, what nonsense are you spouting…"

Gonda scoffed, but Yonedawara stiffened, his face suddenly tense.

"You've slandered me without any basis, causing me psychological harm. I'll be suing you for defamation, so you'd better get someone who knows the law."

"W-Wait! In that case, allow me to handle this."

Yonedawara quickly cut in.

"You know the law?"

"I graduated from law school. And you, on what grounds are you claiming defamation? I haven't seen Mr. Gonda slandering you at all!"

Instead of replying, I pulled a tape recorder out of my pocket and pressed the play button. Immediately, Gonda's voice came through.

'You're this brat's lawyer?'

'Fine. It'll be amusing to watch you grovel on the ground, begging for my forgiveness.'

As the recorder clicked off, both Gonda and Yonedawara's faces froze.

"S-So what if you have a tape? I was merely stating the truth."

"M-Mr. Gonda! Please, don't say anything else that could give this man more ammunition!"

"W-What are you worrying about, Yonedawara? That lawyer insulted me as well! What do you think he said to me on the phone earlier? He's only playing a small part of the tape. He edited it to suit his needs. There's no way this could be accepted as evidence!"

I smirked and decided to mock Gonda for his poor judgment.

"Don't worry. It's not up to you, the police, or even the courts to decide. It'll be the general public, watching this on a morning talk show."

This time, Gonda visibly panicked. He looked toward Yonedawara, searching for some excuse. Yonedawara quickly spoke up.

"D-Don't try to change the subject! The issue we're discussing is still that this child didn't deliver the missing chess pieces!"

"T-That's right! If we report this kid to the police and have a search done at her house, I'm sure we'll find the missing pieces. Once we do, there'll be no way to talk your way out of this!"

"That's ridiculous! I sent the full set!"

This man, Gonda, could very well do something like that. After all, he's a city councilman. If they actually conducted a search of her house, whether or not they found the missing pieces, Satsuki's family would forever bear the stigma of being branded thieves. I didn't particularly care if that little brat found herself in trouble, but I couldn't just sit back and let a power-hungry politician think he could do whatever he wanted.

But without knowing where the missing pieces had gone, no matter how much I tried to deflect, I wouldn't be able to come up with a definitive solution.

Satsuki maintained that she'd sent the full set. Yet, seven pieces were missing. Was Gonda trying to cause trouble with the deal? If so, finding the missing pieces would be difficult.

"By the way, how valuable is this chess set?"

Suddenly, Kageno, who had been standing silently behind me, spoke up.

Gonda seemed momentarily startled by the unexpected question from such a sullen-looking man, but he ordered Yonedawara to fetch the pieces and then puffed out his chest, speaking with pride.

"This is an extremely valuable chess set, commissioned by the 10th Sultan of the great Ottoman Empire, Suleiman the Magnificent. In my estimation, it's worth no less than 65000 dollars."

"S... 65000 dollars!?"

Satsuki gasped in shock. …The scale of this conversation was starting to spiral out of control. If Gonda's story were true, Satsuki would have purchased a chess set worth 65000 dollars for only 350.

Twenty-five chess pieces were packed in a box, each one heavily adorned with what appeared to be jewels, the kind of gaudy decoration someone like Gonda would probably love.

"I don't care if it's worth 65000 or whatever, but there are still twenty-five pieces, right? Does it really matter if one or two are missing?"

"Are you an idiot!? Items like this only hold value when all thirty-two pieces are intact! Not a single one can be missing!"

"…Hmm."

It was Kageno who hummed with interest. Turning to look at him, I saw him smirking for some reason.

"Hey, Yamashika. Want me to tell you something interesting?"

Suddenly, Kageno whispered in my ear.

"What is it?"

"The Ottoman Empire was an Islamic state."

"…What?"

"Look at those chess pieces. Don't you see anything strange?"

Kageno pointed at one of the pieces in the box. The queen piece.

I understood that the Ottoman Empire was an Islamic state. But what did that have to do with the queen piece?

"Still don't get it? Then look at the piece next to it."

I felt a bit humiliated that a hack detective like him had figured something out before I did.

But I had no choice. I did as Kageno suggested and looked at the piece next to the queen.

It was a bishop.

"…Ah, now I see."

At that moment, a certain theory popped into my head. As I suspected, someone was trying to frame Satsuki.

"Hey, Gonda. Let me ask you something. Were you the one who found this chess set?"

"…I found it online."

It was Yonedawara who answered. Gonda nodded.

"That's right. Yonedawara has found all sorts of antiques for me in the past. I've never doubted his eye."

"I see. And who received the package when it was delivered?"

"That was also Yonedawara. Hey, lawyer, don't think you can dodge the issue with weird questions. If you don't produce those missing pieces right now, I'll call the police this time for sure."

"Calm down. There's no need to rush."

Now it was clear. Yonedawara was the culprit.

But why?

What possible gain could this man have from hiding the chess pieces?

I glanced around the room. It was filled to the brim with art and antiques.

…Could it be? I turned to face Yonedawara.

"Yonedawara, you sure seem to spend a lot of time looking for antiques."

"O-Of course I do."

"By any chance, do you get some sort of reward from Gonda every time you find something valuable?"

"S-So what if I do?"

Yonedawara admitted it easily. Gonda, too, added as if it were no big deal.

"That's right. Yonedawara always finds items of great value at a bargain. It's only natural to reward him for that."

I smirked. So that was it.

"By the way, all the antiques in this room—are they valuable?"

"Naturally."

"Then I assume you've got insurance on them?"

"Of course. Especially on the more valuable pieces."

"Which means you were planning to insure this chess set as well?"

"Hmph. That's right. An appraiser from the insurance company was supposed to come next week! But now, thanks to this incomplete set being delivered…!"

That confirmed it. No doubt about it.

"Gonda, I don't care if you call the police or have them conduct a search, but before you do, let me tell you something. This chess set wasn't made in the Ottoman Empire."

"W-What!? Stop spouting nonsense! What proof do you have to back up such a ridiculous claim!?"

I shrugged my shoulders dramatically, as if to mock them.

"It's a simple matter. If this chess set really was made in the Ottoman Empire, why are there Queen and Bishop pieces?"

Gonda blinked rapidly. At the same time, Yonedawara's face turned pale.

"W-What do you mean?"

"The Ottoman Empire was an Islamic state. You know about Islam, right? Women were treated with respect, not paraded around for all to see. There's no way a chess set made in such a country would have a Queen piece. The same goes for the Bishop. A Bishop is a Christian religious title, isn't it?"

"W-What are you saying…?"

Gonda murmured, almost groaning.

"It's obvious, isn't it? This set is a fake."

"N-No! That's impossible! I have a keen eye for these things! This is undoubtedly a valuable item!"

"You can think whatever you want. But in the Islamic world, Queens and Bishops don't exist. That's an indisputable fact. And these jewels? They look pretty suspicious too. They might just be colored glass."

I didn't miss the way Satsuki's face stiffened.

"E-Even if that's true! That brat definitely engaged in a fraudulent transaction! Yonedawara, what are you doing? Call the police already!"

"Hold on, Mr. Gonda. Let me tell you one more interesting story."

I turned to face Yonedawara, who had gone completely pale.

"There was once a man. He wanted money. His master had more money than he could ever need. This man was tasked with buying antiques for his master, scouring the market for them. His master promised him a reward whenever he found a real treasure.

One day, the man bought a chess set that looked valuable for 3500 dollars. He told his master it was worth 65000 dollars. But in reality, it was a cheap, worthless set that wasn't even worth 350. The man just wanted the reward from his master.

Then, out of the blue, his master said he was going to insure the item. If it was insured, the insurance company would appraise the piece down to the last detail. When that happened, it would become clear that the set wasn't worth 65000—or even 3500. The man was in trouble. But then, he had a great idea. He decided to claim that the set was incomplete."

After a brief pause, Gonda exploded.

"H-How dare you spin such a wild tale! Yonedawara has been loyal to me for years! I won't allow you to tarnish that trust just to change the subject!"

"Believe me or don't, that's up to you. But if you call the police, I'll tell them this story. That's all."

"S-Shut up! You have no proof, and yet you…!"

"I do have proof."

"…What?"

I pointed my thumb at his oddly named secretary—Inasaku Yonedawara—whose face was deathly pale and whose body was trembling, on the verge of collapse.

"H-Hey, Yonedawara. Don't tell me you really…"

"N-N-No, of course not! Why would I ever do something like that!?"

His denial lacked any conviction. I decided to finish him off.

"In any case, if you're going to turn this kid over to the police, I'll tell them everything I just said too. The investigation won't take long. If they search someone's room, they'll probably find the missing items pretty quickly."

The two middle-aged men stood there, dumbfounded.

Kageno yawned, looking bored. There was no longer any reason for us to stay.

"Let's go, Satsuki."

"Oh. Y-Yeah!"

Unspecified day, Unspecified time, Yamashika Law Office

Three days after I'd humiliated a certain city councilman.

As usual, the useless detective lying on the client sofa suddenly spoke, as if he'd just remembered something.

"Hey, you scam artist lawyer."

"What is it, Mr. Socially Inept Detective?"

"That secretary, Yonedawara or whatever his name was, got fired. Also, it turns out some of Gonda's art collection was actually counterfeit."

"Hmph, serves him right."

As they say, "Ignorance is bliss." If he hadn't made an enemy of me, he could've continued living in blissful ignorance, surrounded by fake art.

After that, Tamasaburo Gonda's name never came up again.

I never got my Rolex back, but as promised, I did manage to squeeze 150 dollars out of Satsuki, plus another 70 as my legal fee.

220 dollars in just a few days. No wonder I can't quit this lawyer gig.

Kageno started snoring again, and I, too, settled back, reading the newspaper to pass the time, waiting for a phone call from some poor soul falsely accused of murder.

Then, a thought crossed my mind.

Come to think of it, that Satsuki kid made around three grand out of this whole ordeal too. Three grand. For a middle schooler, that's a fortune.

If a typical middle school girl got her hands on that kind of money, she'd probably just spend it on clothes and accessories.

But Satsuki wasn't your average girl. She was the type of kid who'd come up with a scheme to make money off a city councilman. A brat like her, with three grand in her pocket, was bound to get into trouble. And the one who'd inevitably get caught up in it would be—

Just then.

Without so much as a knock, the office door flew open, and in walked the little brat.

"Heh heh heh…"

That brat—Iyo Satsuki—walked into my office with a sly grin on her face, puffing out her non-existent chest as if she were about to make some grand announcement.

I had a bad feeling about this.

"Listen to this! There's this obnoxious bureaucrat named Gotoku—"

Same Day, Same Time, A Certain Antique Shop

An elderly man minding the shop muttered to himself absentmindedly.

"Who'd have thought someone would actually buy that thing? Young folks these days… I just can't figure them out…"

That chess set.

All he'd done was pick it up from the trash and polish it a bit.

"But now that I look at it closely, this wristwatch says 'LOLEX.' Isn't the proper spelling supposed to be 'ROLEX?'"

(How to Make 10 Times More Money with Chess? — End)

借金と浴衣で
もうける方法？

How to Profit with Debt and a Yukata?

It happened on a scorching hot summer afternoon.

“Zenko! You here?”

The office door was flung open, and in walked the little demon, Iyo Satsuki, who was composed entirely of the three elements of disaster, calamity, and misfortune. For some reason, she was wearing a yukata and holding a fan in one hand.

On a normal day, I would have been forced to choose between pretending not to be home or faking sleep.

But today, I didn't have time for that.

“Ugh...”

I held my head in my hands as I stared at the items laid out on the table.

“What's the matter, Zenko? It's a rare sight to see you sitting around with your arms crossed in the middle of the day, deep in thought. Did you catch some weird summer flu or something? Oh, but there's no way you'd catch a cold, you know what we say about idiots in Japan.”

“...”

I couldn't help but silently worry about the future of this country. What kind of education produces a middle schooler who talks like this?

“So, what's bothering you?”

“...I went to the convenience store earlier and bought some raw eggs, salt, a newspaper, batteries, and a bag of potato chips.”

Satsuki tilted her head in confusion.

“That's a strange combination... But okay, and?”

“They gave me a pair of disposable chopsticks.”

“...What?”

Satsuki's mouth hung open, her face a mix of confusion and disbelief.

“I can't stop wondering which of these items they expect me to use the chopsticks on...”

“You're an idiot! There's no need to wonder about that!”

“...What do you mean?”

Satsuki declared confidently.

“They're for the newspaper! You won't get your hands dirty that way!”

“...”

Normally, I wouldn't give the suggestions of this little devil the time of day.

But in this unbearable heat, my brain power was somewhat diminished. Plus, I had nothing better to do.

Who could blame me for being possessed by the mad thought of finding out what would happen if I used chopsticks to turn the pages of a newspaper?

I snapped the chopsticks apart, held them in my right hand, and spread the newspaper open on the table. I pinched a corner of the page with the chopsticks.

Hmm.

Now that I think about it, I vaguely remember seeing old TV dramas where some guy would turn the pages of a newspaper with chopsticks while eating breakfast. So maybe it's not that strange to use chopsticks to turn a newspaper's pages after all.

Just as I was about to embrace this line of thinking, the office door opened, and a new visitor appeared.

It was Kageno, the bumbling detective I knew.

The moment he saw me turning the pages of the newspaper with chopsticks, his cigarette fell from his mouth.

“...You have some strange habits, don't you?”

What am I, an animal?

At the same time, my cognitive abilities finally returned to their usual level. Now that I thought about it, turning the pages of a newspaper with chopsticks did seem a bit ridiculous from an outsider's perspective.

“Don't drop your cigarette in my office. You'll make it dirty.”

I said this in an attempt to change the subject.

“Relax. I haven't lit it yet.”

Kageno, unable to hide his exasperation, picked up the cigarette he dropped and sat down on the sofa in front of me.

Just as he was about to light the cigarette, I swiftly snatched it from his mouth and tossed it into the ashtray. Kageno gave me a silent, reproachful look, but eventually clicked his tongue and put his lighter away.

“So, what sparked the idea to use chopsticks to turn the pages of a newspaper?”

The one who answered Kageno's question was Satsuki.

“He went to the convenience store and bought some eggs, salt, a newspaper, batteries, and potato chips, and they gave him a pair of chopsticks. So, when Zenko didn't know what to do with the chopsticks, I told him what to use them for.”

“…”

Kageno looked at us with eyes full of pity, as if he genuinely felt sorry for us.

“Has the heat finally fried your brains? Well, to be honest, I've been noticing signs of that for a while now.

Are you two idiots? Who in the world gives out chopsticks to turn the pages of a newspaper?”

...When he puts it so bluntly, I can't help but think he has a point.

Still, something about Kageno's condescending tone rubbed me the wrong way, and it seemed Satsuki felt the same. She frowned in protest.

“Then what are we supposed to do with the chopsticks? Don't tell me you're going to suggest something boring like saving them for later, right?”

Kageno answered as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

“They're for the salt.”

“…”

“…”

“When you lick the salt, your fingers will get damp, right? So, you use the chopsticks to pinch it.”

“...Do you seriously buy salt just to lick it?”

“Yeah. It's something you do when you're starving. It feels great when the salt slides down your throat on an empty stomach.”

“…”

“…”

The Yamashika Law Office was once again in a state of suspended activity.

“Good grief...”

After that conversation—which couldn't be described as constructive even if you stretched the definition to its limits—had reached a lull, I headed to the next room to make some tea. Since there was no beautiful girl around to make tea for me, I had no choice but to pour it myself. Some poor soul tried to ask me to make him tea as well, but when I curtly replied, “That'll be one dollar,” I got no response.

“Stuck in a room like this in the middle of the day, making your own tea... You really don't look like someone in their early twenties, you know?”

Satsuki said, fanning herself with her paper fan, throwing in an unnecessary observation.

I felt a vein throb at my temple, but if I let myself get worked up and responded now, it would only validate her words. I forced myself to maintain a calm demeanor.

“So, why are you wearing a yukata? You got something going on?”

Kageno asked Satsuki. She glared back at him with a sharp look.

“Shouldn't you have asked that a lot sooner?”

Then, without warning, she twirled around in front of us.

“Well? Isn't it cute?”

I sipped my green tea, while Kageno scratched his head with a sleepy look on his face. We took turns spouting old, worn-out phrases.

“Pearls before swine.”

“Throwing roses into the abyss.”

“A wasted treasure.”

“Much ado about nothing.”

“Closing the barn door after the horse has bolted.”

“That's way too dated, Yamashika. At least say something like 'You can put lipstick on a pig, but it's still a pig.'”

“…”

Satsuki pursed her lips and swung her fan like in a straight man skit, smacking both mine and Kageno's heads.

“Shut up, shut up, shut up! Ugh, I can't believe I bothered asking such a stupid question to two guys who are mentally checked out!”

“So, you've finally realized it?”

I said quickly, and Kageno chimed in with a sleepy nod of agreement.

“Too bad. If you'd come to that realization twenty years earlier, you might've had a better life.”

“Hey, she's only fourteen.”

“Then I guess it was too late for her even before she was born.”

“Kiiiiiiiiiiiiii!”

Satsuki's language skills devolved to that of a monkey, and she began whacking mine and Kageno's heads alternately with her fan, like she was playing a game of Whac-A-Mole. Despite the oppressive heat, she had an incredible amount of energy.

“Haah, haah, fine! I'll just get to the point already!”

Still panting, Satsuki jabbed her fan at me like it was a sword.

“You know there's a festival next week, right?!”

“Nope.”

“...*Yaaawn*”

I answered indifferently, while Kageno simply yawned lazily in response.

Satsuki devolved into more monkey-like gibberish for a moment before quickly collecting herself.

“Anyway, there's a festival called the Uenohara Festival! And it's in danger of being canceled!”

Oh, the Uenohara Festival.

Now that she mentioned it, that name did ring a bell as the summer festival that happened around this time of year.

“So, the guy running the festival—well, I say 'running,' but he's just the head of the neighborhood association—he's a total loser. He got into illegal gambling, racked up a bunch of debt, and now 'certain people' are threatening to collect the debt by making him pay a bunch of extra money for the festival booths or else.”

“...You mean protection money?”

“Yeah, that's it! They're threatening to make him pay more protection money than last year, or they'll send in some goons to collect the debt by force.”

I see. So, in short, this person got involved in illegal gambling run by the yakuza and ended up getting burned.

In this country, all forms of gambling, with very few exceptions, are illegal. And that neighborhood association president, having not only engaged in illegal gambling but also accumulated debts, likely found it difficult to say "no" to the unreasonable demands from "those people."

“So, where did you even get this kind of information?”

Kageno asked a very reasonable question. Satsuki responded with a *tsk tsk tsk* sound.

“Don't underestimate my information network! Anyway, Zenko, you should do something about it!”

She pointed her fan sharply at me. There was no subtlety to her words. Also, what happened to the reason she was wearing a yukata?

“No way. I don't care what happens to the festival.”

“What are you talking about?! It's a festival! A summer tradition! A cultural event! It's the one event everyone looks forward to all year! Zenko, you never contribute anything to the community, so at least do some volunteer work this time!”

“Volunteer work, huh? I never thought I'd hear that word come out of your mouth.”

“Now that you mention it, that is pretty unusual. Satsuki, you're up to something, aren't you?”

“Ugh.”

Questioned by Kageno, Satsuki visibly took a step back.

“N-No, it's not like I'm thinking of making a little money by running a stall or anything. It's not like I'm annoyed about paying the venue fee or anything like that.”

“...”

So transparent. Also, is this kid really planning to run a stall at the festival, considering she's just a middle schooler?

With both me and Kageno eyeing her somewhat suspiciously, Satsuki hurriedly tried to cover it up.

“Anyway, um, yeah, that's right! If the festival gets canceled, the boys in my class won't have a chance to bring me offerings! And if that happens, they'll cry, and the humidity will rise, making it even more unbearably hot!”

I waved my hand dismissively.

“Ah, let them cry all they want. Just set the air conditioner to dehumidify, and problem solved.”

Normally, this would have been the point where she would grumble a bit and give up. But today, Satsuki was not about to back down. A sinister smile suddenly appeared on her face.

“Heh heh heh... I figured you'd be stubborn about it, Mr. Perpetually-Unemployed Lawyer. That's why I made sure to lay the groundwork this time.”

“...Groundwork, you say?”

For a brief moment, I had a bad feeling.

And then, as if on cue, the phone rang. I was still concerned about what Satsuki said, but for now, I picked up the receiver.

“Hello, Yamashika Law Office.”

“It's me.”

“Ugh.”

“A rather unusual greeting for a client-facing business.”

A voice laced with sarcasm.

The person on the other end of the line was Hiroto Takeda, the vice president of the local bar association. He's an extremely serious lawyer, and we don't exactly get along.

“...What can I do for you?”

“Don't play dumb. You've already heard from a girl named Satsuki, haven't you?”

I glared at Satsuki.

This damn brat. Of all people, she went and laid the groundwork with this guy. How on earth did a middle schooler even manage to make connections with the bar association?

Satsuki, for her part, just smiled smugly. I silently vowed to one day frame her for something and get her arrested.

“So, you understand now, Yamashika. Your mission this time is to ensure that a festival, which the general public is eagerly looking forward to, goes ahead without any issues.”

What mission?

“...Why me?”

“I hear that some of 'those people'—in other words, yakuza-like individuals—are involved this time. You'll be fine. Even if you get hit, you can take it.”

Give me a break.

“What if I refuse?”

“I've already gathered most of the documents needed to revoke your lawyer's license. The reasons include extreme lack of professionalism, irresponsibility, lack of integrity, and just for good measure, we'll throw in bad behavior, laziness, and a cold attitude toward clients... With all these reasons lined up, all I need is the president's signature.”

I silently vowed to one day sue him for defamation and intimidation. Also, being cold toward clients has nothing to do with this!

But... with my license on the line, I had no choice but to comply.

“Fine, fine, I get it. I'll do it. I just have to do it, right?”

“A wise decision. I wish you were always this cooperative. Now, let me explain the situation in more detail. You know about the Uenohara Festival, right?”

“Well, I know there's such a festival.”

“Every year, the festival organizers pay a certain amount of protection money to those people. The amount isn't particularly large, and in exchange, they handle the festival's troublemakers and security issues, so it's been quietly tolerated.

But this year, the fee has been raised significantly, and they've imposed unreasonable demands like charging new vendors an exorbitant registration fee.”

“...Why?”

“Didn't the girl Satsuki already tell you? The person in charge of the festival's management has racked up a significant debt through the gambling ring run by those people, so they can't protest against these demands. If things continue like this, it will affect the festival's operations, and the whole event might be canceled. Do something about it. That's all.”

The call abruptly ended.

Good grief. I sighed heavily as I placed the receiver back on the phone.

“Well, that settles it! I know where they are, so follow me!”

Satsuki puffed out her non-existent chest, brimming with confidence.

“Sounds tough in this heat. Good luck.”

Kageno said casually, as if it didn't concern him.

But unfortunately for him, I'm not the kind of selfless person who would let someone else take it easy.

“This is my office. Get up and move.”

“...”

◆

“Damn, it's hot...”

How many times had I muttered this phrase since the beginning of the month, every time I ventured outside?

The temperature must have exceeded thirty degrees a long time ago. I didn't even want to think about how high the last digit might be.

Two grown men, one of them in a suit, were walking in this unbearable heat, being led by a middle school girl in a yukata. To any outside observer, it must have been quite a bizarre sight. But at this point, I didn't have the energy to care about how we looked. Although I never skipped my daily workout, it seemed that spending all day in an air-conditioned room wasn't good for my body after all.

Unable to take it anymore, I took off my suit jacket and carried it under my arm.

“We're here! This is the place!”

By the time I was drenched in sweat, Satsuki pointed her fan at a large house.

The exterior was purely traditional Japanese style. It was surrounded by white walls topped with roof tiles. I could easily imagine that inside the walls was a large garden, complete with a bamboo water fountain making that *kapon* sound. It was the kind of old-fashioned mansion that made you think, “Yeah, I can believe this is where those people live.”

“...This is the place, huh?”

Kageno muttered.

“You know it?”

“I've only heard rumors, but yeah. According to the stories, those people are definitely running a gambling ring here.

That said, their operation is still relatively new. They're not the kind of group that can openly call themselves a yakuza gang. In fact, they're trying to keep a low profile, making a living off small-time gambling and protection rackets to avoid drawing attention from the bigger, more

established syndicates. There's probably no one here who's had to chop off a finger, and I doubt anyone has tattoos, either.

...Well, maybe they've got someone who lost a finger in an accident or someone with stick-on tattoos.”

Why did it seem like everyone around me, from Satsuki to Kageno, had such an uncanny knowledge of weird stuff?

The gate was huge. However, there didn't seem to be any guards or security cameras, just an intercom. Getting in would be easy.

That said, entering without permission would constitute trespassing, so I had no choice but to press the intercom button. A rather out-of-place *ping-pong* sound rang out.

“Who's there?”

A gruff voice came through, clearly trying to sound intimidating.

“A guest. I came to talk to the boss. I'm coming in.”

“What!? H-Hey, wait a minute!”

Ignoring the attempt to stop me, I entered through the gate. Kageno and Satsuki followed behind.

...Why Satsuki came along was a bit of a mystery, but I didn't have the energy to shoo her away.

Just as it appeared from the outside, the house had a large estate. A stone path stretched about twenty meters to the main mansion.

Then, a group of men came bustling out of the house. They were fairly well-built, and if they glared at you, any ordinary person would likely be frightened.

A bald man, who seemed to be the leader, approached me aggressively.

“Who the hell are you? You know this is the Violet Bunch's turf, and you still walked in here!?”

V... Violet Bunch?

I wanted to ask them if they weren't embarrassed to say that name out loud, but I held back the urge.

However...

“Violet Bunch? You guys named yourselves after some kindergarten playgroup and aren't ashamed of it?”

Satsuki clearly lacked the concept of “knowing when to shut up.”

The men around us instantly bristled with hostility.

“Y-You little brat! Just because you're a kid doesn't mean we'll let you run your mouth!”

But Satsuki puffed out her flat chest and stood her ground.

“I already told you, I'm not here for you! Stop wasting time and take me to your boss, now!”

“The boss—no, the head of the family doesn't meet with punks like you! Get lost!”

“No way. Fine, if you won't take us, we'll just find him ourselves. You can go ahead and disappear.”

“You little brat...!”

...This was not good. It was the classic “powder keg” situation. If this kept up, I might end up doing unnecessary exercise in this stupid heat.

“Hey, Satsuki. We didn't come here to pick on the weak. Stop throwing fuel on the fire.”

“...Zenko, are you seriously saying that?”

I was dead serious, but for some reason, Satsuki sounded exasperated.

“You... you bastards! We don't lay a hand on civilians, but if you're the ones picking a fight, that's a different story!”

The bald man shouted. His confident tone earned him a chorus of “Oooh!” from the other men.

I'd bet money on it. That's probably a line he's practiced saying many times.

Satsuki sighed.

“It's your side that's acting all high and mighty. Like I said, I'm not here for you. If you're not going to pass the message, then get out of my way already. Or what? Is your brain as smooth as your head, and you can't even understand what I'm saying?”

“You little...!”

The bald man turned beet red and swung a punch at her. As Satsuki suggested, it seemed he was indeed lacking a few wrinkles in his brain.

I briefly wondered how Satsuki planned to deal with the mess she'd started, but—

“Kageno, I'll leave the rest to you.”

“...Huh?”

Satsuki grabbed Kageno's arm, who had been standing idly by, and pushed him in front of the bald man's punch.

The bald guy was momentarily stunned by the sudden change of target, but he quickly pulled back his punch. Apparently, he figured it was easier to hit Kageno than a kid, and he swung his fist again, this time aiming for Kageno.

“...Hey.”

Kageno, moving with resignation, caught the punch with his left hand.

Then, he headbutted the bald man square in the nose.

“Gah!?”

As the guy staggered, Kageno mercilessly drove his right knee into the man's left side.

“Guh!”

The bald man bent over, clutching his stomach, and Kageno delivered a solid punch to his head.

“Ugh!”

The bald man collapsed to the ground like a frog that failed its landing.

“Urgh... guh... guh...”

Still, I had to give him credit for getting back on his feet.

Kageno, having finished his task, glared at Satsuki with a resentful look.

“...Why me?”

Satsuki declared boldly.

“It's only natural for a servant to take the hit for the queen!”

I wanted to ask when she switched from being a communist to an authoritarian ruler—or rather, when her revolution took place.

“You bastards! That's it, no more mercy! Get them, boys!”

The bald man shouted the obligatory line. In an instant, seven sweaty guys surrounded us, ready to attack at any moment.

“Hmph! You fools! Do you really think you can defeat me with just numbers?!”

Waving her fan like a strategist's fan, Satsuki declared,

“Now, go get them, my minions!”

“…”

“…”

Kageno and I simultaneously looked up at the sky. We were probably thinking the same thing. If we had to fight these guys under the blazing sun, it was going to be unbearably hot...

“Hey, Kageno.”

“What is it, you con-artist lawyer?”

“This is a rare chance to blow off some steam, but I don't have much stress built up lately, so I'll let you take on five of them.”

“...This is why you're a con artist.”

As we exchanged words—

“Take this!!”

The first goon rushed at me. He swung a wide right hook. We'd been talking too much to dodge it, so I had no choice but to block with my left arm.

Even though he was just a grunt, the guy was big. A punch with that much weight behind it hurt quite a bit. It felt like it had ignited some kind of primal fighting instinct in me.

“…”

Without hesitation, I grabbed the front of the goon's shirt with my left hand, pulled him close, and threw a right hook straight into his face.

“Ugh! Gah! Arrgh!”

Three hits, no questions asked. Each punch drew a different kind of pained scream, which was somewhat amusing.

“You bastard!”

Now, another goon, B, came at me from behind. He aimed a mid-kick at me from the right. I had no choice but to throw the first goon aside and block B's kick with my arm. A dull impact reverberated through my body.

...Damn, a kick with that much weight behind it still hurt. But as my family motto goes, “If someone hits you, hit them back three times harder.”

I grabbed B's leg with my left hand, unbalancing him, and immediately started pummeling him with punches. It probably looked a bit ridiculous from the outside. I took a couple of hits in return, but since I had a better stance, the damage I dealt was far greater.

When B finally staggered, I noticed that goon A was trying to get back up. I gave B a good kick to the stomach as a finishing blow, then grabbed A by the hair, yanking him to his feet. While he was dazed, I headbutted his nose and drove my knee into his stomach. That put an end to A and B.

I've never officially trained in martial arts. The only real experience I have is a wide range of street fights.

And in a street fight, logic doesn't matter. You get in close, and you hit more than the other guy. That's all there is to it. As long as you're grappling up close, there's no dodging kicks and headbutts.

Looking over, I saw that goons C, D, and even E, who had attacked Kageno, were all lying on the ground in a spread-eagle position.

Kageno glanced at me with a resentful expression. His face seemed to say, “Why did I have to deal with more of them?”

There were only three left, including the bald man—just as I was thinking that.

“W-Wait, what are you doing? Let me go!”

“Shut up, brat! You two, stop right there!”

At the same time as I heard Satsuki's frantic voice, the bald man shouted.

...From the sound of things, I could already guess what had happened. Still, I had to confirm the situation. I reluctantly turned to face the bald man.

“Do you care what happens to this brat!?”

As expected, there was Satsuki, caught in a chokehold by the bald man.

“...What now, Yamashika?”

Kageno asked in a tone that was more tired than exasperated.

“What do you think?”

“Yeah, fair enough.”

"Hey, what are you mumbling about? Listen, if you don't want anything to happen to this brat—wait, hold on, don't turn your back on me! Don't just walk into the house without a word!"

“W-Wait, you two! You're not seriously thinking of abandoning me, are you!?”

Why does that brat only ever make things more complicated in this scorching heat?

I turned back and threw out a remark.

“I don't care what happens to that brat. Boil her, roast her, do whatever you like. But I'll give you a heads-up—no matter how you cook her, she'll probably be too tough to eat, so be careful.”

“What the—"

The bald guy looked dumbfounded, and Satsuki raised her voice in protest.

“Y-You've got to be kidding! What do you think I am!? If I die, I'll come back to haunt you! And if I do, you'll be too scared to sleep at night! And if you can't sleep, you'll get heatstroke in the summer! And if you get heatstroke, you'll get even lazier and eventually die of starvation!”

Why is that brat still so full of energy in this unbearable heat?

As I was oddly impressed, Kageno spoke up.

“Yamashika, let's just go. You're getting tired because you keep wasting time on them.”

“...For once, you're right.”

“H-Hey, you two! Don't just ignore me and walk away! Hey, you guys, stop standing around and block their way! You'll be cutting off your fingers later if you don't!”

Responding to the bald man's command, a few men who were still standing—brave or perhaps foolish—moved to block Kageno and me.

I scratched my head lazily.

“Sigh. Still not done, huh? Attacking a lawyer isn't going to end well for you.”

The moment I said that, the atmosphere around us completely changed.

“W-What did you say!?”

“He's a lawyer!?”

“T-This is bad, bro!”

...Damn. If I'd known this would happen, I should've introduced myself earlier.

The golden badge that proved I was a lawyer was attached to the collar of my jacket. But because of the heat, I had taken off my jacket.

I picked up the jacket I had dropped at some point and showed them the golden badge on the collar. The bald guys suddenly looked like pigeons that had been shot at, and in the confusion, Satsuki managed to escape.

“Hmph, you think just because you're a lawyer, we're going to back down?”

“I do. Kageno, let's go.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“H-Hold it, you bastard! You think you can just walk away after hitting us!? I'll call the cops and have you arrested!”

I wanted to ask if he was in any position to call the cops, but instead, I responded like a proper lawyer.

“Hey, you guys started the fight, didn't you? We just hit you back to defend ourselves. Self-defense is recognized as legal by everyone these days, isn't it?”

“U-Uggggh...”

By the way, they threw the first punch, but we were the ones who provoked them, and knocking them out might technically fall outside the bounds of “self-defense” and could be considered “excessive force.” But I doubted these guys would realize that, so I didn't worry about it.

“T-Then I'll call the cops and charge you with trespassing!”

The bald guy said stubbornly.

“If you're going to say that, the correct charge would be 'unlawful entry.' But that only applies when you enter a building without permission and without any legitimate reason. I have a reason for being here, and I came in through the front door, so 'unlawful entry' doesn't apply to me.”

“W-What...!?”

“You should study the law a little bit. It comes in handy in situations like this. Now, let us through. If you keep getting in the way of a lawyer, it's you guys who'll get the cops on your backs. So why don't you tell me where your boss is?”

“...It's the room straight ahead at the end of the corridor.”

The bald guy reluctantly answered, and no one else tried to stop Kageno or me.

As we leisurely walked inside the house, Satsuki came running after us.

“Hey! What was that just now!? Were you really going to leave me behind!?”

'Of course we were.'

Kageno and I answered in perfect harmony. Needless to say, Satsuki looked displeased.

“Oh, and I've been wondering—if you're told to leave and you don't, doesn't that count as 'trespassing' or something?”

I shrugged and replied.

“Well, not knowing enough is always a problem.”

“Yeah, you're right. There are some shady lawyers out there who make a living by bluffing their way through situations with a silver tongue, huh?”

“...”

I guess she thought she was getting back at me. Satsuki had a smug look on her face.

After that, there was no more resistance, and Kageno and I reached our destination.

A few men, led by the bald guy, followed us from a distance, about ten meters away, looking nervous. But I didn't pay them any mind.

I slid open the door to the room the bald guy had directed us to.

“Who's making all that noise!? Didn't I tell you to knock before entering!?”

...Do you even knock on sliding doors? Well, whatever.

It was another traditional Japanese-style room. Tatami floors, and predictably, there was a hanging scroll and a katana displayed in the corner.

A man who looked quite important, dressed in a kimono, was sitting on a cushion, reading a book.

“Who are you?”

“I'm Yamashika, a lawyer. I came to talk to you.”

“A... lawyer!?”

The man was visibly shaken.

I grabbed a cushion from the corner of the room without asking and sat down right in front of him.

“What's your name?”

“I-I am Taro Igarashi. I apologize for my rudeness... I didn't realize...”

His attitude had suddenly changed completely.

Watching this, Satsuki seemed to be thinking, “What even is a lawyer...?”

“Well, Mr. Igarashi, you need to keep your subordinates in line. That bald guy at the entrance almost hit me, you know?”

Igarashi immediately shouted.

“H-Hey! Where's Yamada!? Yamada!”

“H-Here, sir.”

The bald guy, who had been waiting in the corridor, appeared, looking extremely nervous.

“Yamada, did you lay hands on these people!?”

“W-Well, sir, I tried to stop them, but they forced their way in...”

“You idiot! What the hell were you thinking!? Of all people, you laid hands on a lawyer! Get down on your knees and apologize, or do you want to lose all your fingers!?”

The bald guy, Yamada, dropped to the floor and pressed his forehead against the tatami, apologizing profusely.

“I-I'm so sorry! Please forgive me!”

“Alright, alright. I'm not a monster. I'll let it go, so just get that ugly face of yours out of here.”

At my words, Igarashi waved his hand to dismiss him, and Yamada scurried out of the room.

“So, Mr. Yamashika, what brings you here today...?”

Finally, we were getting to the main point. Maybe I should've just announced my arrival earlier with “The great lawyer Yamashika is here!”

“Mr. Igarashi, I hear you've been forcing the vendors at the Uenohara Festival to pay unusually high fees and registration costs this year.”

Igarashi frantically waved his right hand back and forth.

“N-No, well, we did plan to ask for a little payment, but you see, festivals are always full of troublemakers. So, I thought we'd send some of our young guys to help deal with any problems... kind of like a protection fee...”

His explanation was weak and unconvincing.

“I'm not here to nitpick about you guys charging a fee.

But raising the amount this year, and on top of that, charging a registration fee, isn't really a good look, is it?”

“Well... yes, but you see... with the bad economy lately, I have to look after my subordinates too...”

“The bad economy isn't just your problem.

And I've heard that you've been putting pressure on the festival organizers who owe you money. That's not good, is it? It could even be considered extortion.”

“N-No, no, no, no, there's no way it could be extortion. It's just that, you see, the guys who owe us money said they couldn't pay it back, so we're just suggesting alternative ways to collect.”

“Oh, is that right? Well, I don't care what kind of collection methods you use. But you're going to drop the idea of raising the stall fees and registration costs higher than usual. That's what I came to tell you.”

Given how scared he was of the word “lawyer,” I thought he'd agree right away.

But, contrary to my expectations, Igarashi hesitated.

“Well, you see, that's a little difficult...”

“Oh? And why's that? I hear the festival itself is on the verge of being canceled because of you guys. If the festival gets called off, you won't be making any money from the stall fees, and you'll be the ones losing out.”

Igarashi rubbed his hands together and let out a sleazy laugh.

“Mr. Yamashika, that's just a rumor. It's a festival everyone's been looking forward to, you see? It's not gonna get canceled just because the stall fees went up a bit. Don't worry, they'll cave in and everything will be settled in the end.”

“Oh, so you're saying you're not going to listen to my request?”

“No, no, nothing like that!

It's just that, well, even if we lower the stall fees, I still have to feed my men. To do that, I've got to make sure I collect on the debts properly. And if that happens—”

For the first time, Igarashi smirked.

“—The collections might get a little... rough. Against my will, of course, but it could end up disrupting the festival this time around.”

“I see. You've got some nerve, don't you? Are you that eager to get handed over to the cops?”

“No, no! That's not it at all! I'm just saying, the festival's less than a week away, and the police don't always act so quickly, as you know. Especially if it's just about some tougher debt collection...”

It seems he wasn't in this line of business for nothing.

Earlier, he'd been groveling as soon as he heard the word “lawyer,” but that was just for show. Inside, he'd been carefully sizing me up the whole time. A crafty guy.

That said, it wouldn't do for him to underestimate a lawyer. If I wanted to, I could easily invoke the Anti-Organized Crime Law. A small group like this could be handed over to the police without much trouble. But as he said, it was questionable whether we'd be able to stop things in time for the festival.

So, I decided to use a solution more in line with my style.

“Hey, Igarashi. You guys are running a gambling operation, right?”

“Well, I mean, it's a small-time thing.”

“And you lend money to the people who lose all their cash, right?”

“Yeah, pretty much. But it's just a few hundred bucks at a time, nothing big. The interest is basically non-existent too.”

“And the guys who lose go right back to gambling with the money they borrow from you, don't they?”

“As expected of Mr. Yamashika, sharp as always.”

Igarashi let out a laugh that couldn't be called refined.

“So, you've got a lot of people who owe you money, huh?”

“Well, more or less.”

“What's bigger: the total amount of money you've lent out or the stall fees you'll collect from the festival?”

“Well, the debts, of course.”

I grinned.

It's never a good idea to get into a debate with a lawyer.

“I'm going to offer you a very reasonable deal.

Listen, I'm not telling you to stop charging stall fees entirely. But I won't let you raise them by applying pressure. If you make any strange moves—”

“Oh? What happens then?”

Igarashi, with a confidence that seemed at odds with his earlier panic when I introduced myself as a lawyer, asked in a relaxed tone.

“—I'll make sure all the money you've lent out is legally erased.”

Igarashi wore a dumbfounded expression for a moment before bursting into dry laughter.

“Haha... You're joking, right? Even a lawyer can't just erase debts like that. Are you going to bankrupt every single one of them? You know as well as I do that gambling debts aren't grounds for bankruptcy, right?”

“I can do it. And I don't even need to use bankruptcy to do it. You should study the law a bit more. You said you lend money to people who lose at gambling, didn't you?”

“Yeah. So what?”

“You know what they use the borrowed money for, right? They gamble with it.”

“Well, yeah, that's true.”

“So, you're lending money knowing it's going to be used for gambling.”

“And so what?”

He still didn't seem to grasp what I was getting at. His voice wavered slightly.

“Do you know that almost all forms of gambling are illegal in this country?”

“Well, yeah, I know that much. But come on, don't blackmail me with that. It's not like we're operating in the open. We're just doing it on a small scale.”

I smirked.

“Then do you know this? If you lend money knowing it'll be used for an illegal purpose, the borrower doesn't have to pay you back.”

“Hahah, what are you talking about... wait, what?”

Igarashi stumbled back, as if his legs had given out.

“You just said you lend money to people for gambling, didn't you? You did, right? And gambling is illegal.

So in this case, it counts as lending for an illegal purpose, which means the borrower doesn't have to repay a single cent. There's even a Supreme Court ruling that supports this. And don't even think about telling me now that you didn't know the money would be used for gambling. I'm not that naive.

So, give it up. If I feel like it, I can gather up everyone who owes you money and represent them all.

And if that happens, there's no way you'll see a single cent of the money you lent out.”

“You're not going to trick me with that nonsense. All the money I've lent out just vanishes? There's no way something that convenient could—”

“If you don't believe me, that's fine. I'd suggest asking some other lawyer about it.

Anyway, that's all I came here to say. One last time: you're not going to raise the stall fees. If you do, I'll make sure all the debts you're owed are wiped out. Keep that in mind.”

With that, I left, accompanied by Satsuki, who had been watching the whole thing with amusement, and Kageno, who looked like he was bored out of his mind.

◆

A week later.

It was early evening when Kageno dropped by my still-quiet office.

But at that moment, I couldn't have cared less about Kageno. I was sitting there, staring at the items on the table, deep in thought.

“Hmm...”

“...What are you brooding over now?”

“I just went to the convenience store and bought some bread, mineral water, a cassette tape, and a magazine.”

“Did they give you chopsticks again?”

“No, a spoon.”

“...”

“I can't stop wondering what the hell they expect me to use it for...”

Kageno grimaced and said,

“Ah, who cares about that.

More importantly, today's the festival. Instead of sitting here with the AC on, drinking tea all day, why don't you treat me to some beer and grilled chicken from one of the stalls?”

“....”

I was still curious about the spoon on the table, but the thought of drinking beer and eating grilled chicken in this unbearable heat was even more appealing.

The Uenohara Festival. It's a typical summer festival you'd find anywhere. There's no clashing of floats or unique dance parades—nothing special, really. But the street leading to the shrine on the outskirts of town is lined with stalls, and the place is bustling with activity.

As you might expect, the festival went ahead without a hitch. Of course, that was all thanks to me, but it seems the world isn't very fair to heroes of justice. There was no sign that said, “Thanks to Lawyer Yamashika,” and none of the stall owners offered me an extra skewer of grilled chicken.

As we were walking down the noisy street lined with stalls, it happened.

“...H-Hey, Yamashika.”

Kageno spoke in a shaken voice, pointing toward a particular corner.

It was rare to see Kageno this rattled. I wondered if it was an ex-girlfriend of his running one of the stalls, and when I looked over—

“Welcome! Ah, three customers? Right this way!”

In an instant, a chill ran down my spine.

There was no mistaking it—a little devil in a yukata.

In one corner, there was a night stall resembling a beer hall with rows of chairs and tables. That's fine.

For some reason, Satsuki was acting as a barker for customers there. Well, it's a festival, so maybe the kid was helping out. That's fine, too.

But. But still.

Why are almost all the customers men?

Why do all the waitresses, or at least what appear to be waitresses, look like middle school girls, and why are they all wearing yukatas?

And why is there a big sign boldly reading “Middle School Girls Café?”

“Oh! If it isn't the lawyer and the great detective!”

The yukata-clad Satsuki, who seemed to be pulling in customers, noticed us and approached.

“It's rare to see you two out in a crowd like this. The festival continues tomorrow, so don't do anything unusual and bring the rain, okay?”

“...Uh, hey, Satsuki. Before anything else, what's this stall?”

“Huh? You can tell just by looking, right? It's a stall where beautiful middle school girls in yukatas are working as waitresses!”

“...”

“...”

“Summer vacation is coming up, right? But, you know, none of my classmates even have enough money to go see a movie, so I planned this stall for them!

But you see, you need to pay for stall space at the festival, and apparently, it's a hassle to set up a stall without permission. So I'm grateful to you guys! Thanks to you, the stall fee was lowered,

and we managed to get some dirt on the neighborhood association president, so setting up the stall was a breeze.”

“...”

For a moment, I felt dizzy.

“And the result is a 'Middle School Girls Café'?”

Kageno asked. Satsuki waved her right hand dismissively.

“Oh, don't be silly. Just because we gave it that name doesn't mean we're doing anything weird. We're just serving okonomiyaki and shaved ice, and all we're doing is delivering it.

Besides, look—our parents are the ones cooking over there.”

I glanced over, and sure enough, in the tent Satsuki pointed to, middle-aged men and women were sweating as they prepared the food.

Well, thinking about it, if middle schoolers alone were running a night stall and the school found out, there'd be hell to pay. It did strike me as odd that the customers were all men and the atmosphere felt somewhat sketchy, but there's no way anyone would try anything with the parents right there.

“Hey, why don't you two stop by? You did help us out, after all. I'll give you a little service.”

I exchanged glances with Kageno.

“...What do you think?”

“Well, why not? Consider it payment for our free labor.”

“It's settled then! Two guests, right this way! The menu's over there, so pick whatever you like!”

Looking where Satsuki pointed, I saw that just like in a café, price tags and sample dishes were displayed—“Yakisoba: 1.50 dollars,” “Shaved Ice: 1 dollar,” and so on.

“She's got this part down... Well, since we're here, might as well enjoy the taste of the festival.”

Just as I was about to nod in agreement with Kageno's words—

“...Huh?”

I noticed a strange piece of paper tucked away, almost hidden among the menu items. Curious, I pulled it out.

“Ah, t-that's—!”

Satsuki hastily snatched the paper from my hand. But she was a second too late.

I had already seen it. The words written on the paper.

It read: “Date Around the Shrine: 15 dollars.”

“I didn't see anything! I didn't see anything, and I'm not involved in any of this!”

Clutching my head and repeatedly muttering to myself as if casting a spell, I bolted from the scene like a rabbit fleeing for its life.

I didn't know how long I'd been running.

Before I knew it, I was in a nearly deserted alleyway.

Even though it was night, the oppressive summer heat had me drenched in sweat from head to toe.

But no matter how far I ran, the nightmarish words I had seen earlier refused to leave my mind.

Kageno was probably enjoying the festival delicacies by now. I envied him this time. Ignorance is bliss, as they say.

If anyone suspected that a lawyer had helped set up a stall like that, I'd kiss my license goodbye, watching it fly off into the distant sky.

Satsuki had completely tricked me. But I couldn't even muster a single word to confront her about it. To think I'd be used like that by a kid...

And then.

Boom! Fireworks bloomed in the night sky.

The sky glowed red for a moment, but soon returned to darkness.

I suddenly thought:

Were fireworks always this bittersweet?

(How to Profit with Debt and a Yukata? — End)

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My First Trial

I looked at the wall clock hanging next to the blackboard. It was 3:00 PM. It was time.

Akenominami Public Middle School, 2nd year, Class B. That's my class.

Right now, the desks in this classroom were arranged in a completely different way from usual.

There was a teacher's desk in front of the blackboard, as always, but instead of a teacher, a male student from Class C was sitting there, the class president with glinting glasses. All of the desks, which were usually neatly arranged in rows, had been moved out into the hallway. On the left side of the teacher's desk sat seven boys and girls from Class C, and on the right side, eight boys and girls from Class D, making a total of fifteen people sitting in chairs. They were acting as the jury.

The back half of the classroom was filled with chairs randomly placed as audience seats. Of course, my classmates from Class B were there, but students from other classes who were interested in the upcoming event had also gathered.

A few meters in front of the jury seats, two sets of desks and chairs were placed facing each other, with one lone desk positioned between them. The desk on the right side was for the defense, the left was for the prosecution, and the desk in the middle was a stand-in for the witness stand. This was the result of a forced recreation of a courtroom from a TV drama using classroom chairs and desks.

Sitting at the defense table were me—Iyo Satsuki—and my classmate, Nae Tamura, who looked quite anxious.

At the prosecution table sat a girl with an air of superiority, directing a nasty smile at me.

"Well, it's time. Ms. Satsuki, are you ready?"

The boy sitting at the teacher's desk—or rather, the judge's seat—spoke to me in a tone far more mature than that of a middle school student. His name was Takeru Yamato. His parents must have been quite something to give him that name.

If I were to explain about him, it would easily take me thirty minutes. Just to talk about his appearance, he's a reasonably handsome student with glasses, tall, with extraordinary athletic ability, strong arms, and on top of it all, excellent grades.

"I'm all set! Ready whenever!"

I answered boldly.

The girl sitting at the prosecution table brushed her long hair aside and said,

“Ms. Satsuki, you’re not a monkey, so would you stop screeching? It’s annoying.”

Grr

I felt a vein pop in my head.

This is how she starts. My nemesis at this school.

Just as I was about to snap back, the class president of Class C—no, the judge—lightly adjusted his glasses with his middle finger and spoke:

“Ms. Uribatake, didn’t I tell you that personal attacks are strictly forbidden?”

“Oh, my apologies.”

My nemesis responded, but I didn’t miss the slight twitch in her cheek when her name was called.

This girl’s name is Yoshiko Uribatake. She’s the daughter of a wealthy farming family and has an older brother who is a real prosecutor. She seems to think she’s somehow superior to the common folk and can’t stand not being number one at everything. She regards me, the most popular student in school, as her rival and constantly tries to compete with me. She’s a vile, insufferable girl—a twisted product of capitalism, if you ask me. I’d love to one day smack her on the head with a quote from Chairman Mao.

However, she seems to have a complex about her name, and every time someone calls her “Uribatake,” her face twitches slightly. It’s amusing to watch.

“So, Ms. Uribatake, are you ready?”

“Of course. There’s no way I’d be unprepared.”

The judge nodded, then looked around the classroom—or rather, the courtroom—and spoke.

“Very well. Let’s begin the class trial.”

I felt like the judge’s glasses gleamed for a moment.

The whole thing started yesterday during sixth period—after gym class ended.

At our school, gym classes for Classes A and B, and Classes C and D, are held together, with boys and girls separated. Also, there's no changing room. Instead, the boys use Class A's classroom, and the girls use Class B's classroom as makeshift changing rooms.

And yesterday, after volleyball class ended and we returned to the classroom, a girl named Akemi Kondo from Class A started making a fuss, saying her wallet was missing. A search for the culprit immediately began, and the suspicion—of all people—fell on my friend, Nae Tamura.

In the past, there had been incidents where wallets left in the classroom disappeared. Since then, during gym class, a teacher with free time would patrol the classrooms.

Therefore, it was suspected that someone who had stayed behind in the classroom before gym class might be the culprit, and that person was Nae.

Naturally, Nae denied it. But despite her denial, Kondo's wallet was somehow found in Nae's bag.

The students from Class A all accused her of being the thief. But everyone in Class B—not just me—knew she would never do something like steal. She's a bit sickly and has a quiet personality, but she's always kind to everyone. She's the complete opposite of a certain lawyer. The reason she was the last person in the classroom before gym class was because she had felt unwell during the previous class and had gone to the nurse's office.

And so, a never-ending argument began between Classes A and B. That's when, for some reason, Takeru Yamato appeared.

If you ask who the most popular person in school is, of course, it's me. If you ask who the most stuck-up person is, it's Uribatake. But if you ask who the biggest weirdo is, everyone will unanimously say Takeru Yamato.

At the end of first year, we had to write an essay titled "My Dream for the Future." According to his essay, his dream is to enter Tokyo University, get a job at a major company, rise to the position of executive, run for city council, build a track record, then become a member of the National Diet, eventually becoming the leader of the ruling party, and lend the command of the Self-Defense Forces to the UN to resolve world conflicts.

By the way, he also wrote that if he fails to get into Tokyo University, his dream is to become a mercenary and fight with weapons to liberate oppressed minority groups. It didn't sound like a joke. For the sake of the world's future, I hope he gets into Tokyo University.

He barged into Class B, where the argument was still raging, and declared:

“A dispute! A dispute! This is unacceptable! First, tell me what happened! You mustn’t be swayed by emotion! You mustn’t judge based on assumptions! To resolve a conflict, the first step is to explain the situation to a third party, who can make a calm and objective judgment—Gwahhhh!?”

Some students were still in the middle of changing. Yamato was immediately beaten up, had a trash can put over his head, and was thrown into the hallway. However, either out of persistence or sheer stubbornness, he came back, covered in trash, exactly five minutes later and forcibly inserted himself into the situation.

But no matter how much he tried, a fight between girls wasn’t something that could easily be resolved. Class A, led by Uribatake, insisted, “She’s the culprit,” while Class B, with me leading the charge, argued, “No, she’s not.” The heated debate went on and on.

It was then that Yamato made a suggestion.

“Satsuki, if I recall correctly, didn’t you write in your recent essay that you wanted to become a lawyer?”

“Yeah, I did.”

"I've heard rumors that you have a brother who is a current prosecutor, Uribatake. Is that true?"

"Yes, it's true."

"Very well. Then, let's proceed like this:

Satsuki, you will act as the defense attorney for Tamura, who is currently under suspicion. Uribatake, you will be the prosecutor.

We will recruit a jury from classes other than A and B, and the two of you will argue your cases, and settle this! I, of course, will serve as the judge!"

... Yamato's proposal, which at first seemed utterly ridiculous, surprisingly faced no opposition.

I held the trust of all my classmates in Class B. The same was true for Nae, who had been accused. She said that she would put her faith in me to prove her innocence.

Surprisingly, Uribatake also seemed to have earned a certain level of respect from her classmates in Class A. None of them objected to her representing the victim and pursuing the case.

And so, the unprecedented class trial was about to begin.

If, at the end of the trial, the jury members—chosen by Yamato rolling dice—found Nae guilty, it would be reported to the teacher. If that happened, it would undoubtedly affect her school record.

However, if she was found not guilty, Uribatake, representing Class A, would have to bow her head and apologize for accusing her.

I couldn't afford to lose—not only to make Uribatake bow her head but also to live up to the trust Nae had placed in me.

"Let us begin by hearing from the prosecution. Ms. Uribatake, please call your first witness."

"Understood. Then—"

Uribatake rose to her feet with a dignified air, not allowing even a finger to be pointed at her. As much as I hate to admit it, her overbearing attitude actually works to her advantage in situations like this.

"For my first witness, I would like to call Ms. Aya Mieno from Class B!"

"Huh, me!?"

Aya, who was sitting in the audience, let out a startled cry.

Ugh. This was unexpected for me, too.

Both Uribatake and I had been given the freedom to call any student involved in the case as a witness. Naturally, I thought Uribatake would call someone from Class A who would only say things favorable to her case… But Aya is from Class B, and not only that, she's one of my friends.

"Ms. Mieno, if you have no objections, please come forward."

Prompted by the judge, Aya hesitantly glanced at me. I nodded, and she seemed to make up her mind and approached the desk in the center of the room, which was being used as the witness stand.

"Please state your class, name, and attendance number."

"Uh, um... Class 2-B, Aya Mieno, attendance number seven."

I don’t think I was the only one wondering what the point of stating the attendance number was. But Takeru Yamato seems to be the kind of person who insists on sticking to formalities.

"Very good. Now, the oath. Do you swear to tell the truth and nothing but the truth, to the best of your conscience?"

"Uh, well, I guess that’s the plan…"

"Excellent. Ms. Uribatake, you may begin your questioning."

"Thank you, Your Honor.

Now, Ms. Mieno, you participated in yesterday’s gym class, correct?"

"Y-Yes, I did."

"So, you saw the events unfold, didn’t you?"

"Well, I suppose you could say that..."

"Very well. Then let’s start with the basics. During which period did the incident occur?"

"Uh, sixth period."

"Good. Now, after the class ended, what happened first?"

"Um, Kondo from Class A started freaking out, saying her wallet was missing…"

"But in the end, the wallet was found, wasn’t it?"

"Uh? Y-Yeah, that’s true, but…"

"And you know where that wallet was found, don’t you? Please explain in detail."

"Uh..."

Aya hesitated, and I clicked my tongue.

"Ms. Mieno, you are required to answer the questions you are asked."

The judge’s glasses glinted as he spoke. Aya, looking uncomfortable, eventually began to speak hesitantly.

"It… it was found in Tamura’s bag."

"Thank you. That will be all."

Uribatake’s skillful questioning left the room in dead silence.

Damn you, Uribatake. So, she intentionally had a student from Class B, one of my friends no less, confirm that Tamura was the suspect. And on top of that, she deliberately skipped over the details of why Nae was suspected in the first place. Her goal was to make it crystal clear to everyone that Nae was the suspect. It seems her brother being an active prosecutor isn’t just for show.

"Very well. Ms. Satsuki, you may begin your cross-examination."

With the judge’s prompt, I stood up.

"Ms. Mieno, could you explain in more detail how exactly Tamura’s bag was searched, and how the wallet was found?"

Just as I finished asking this, Uribatake shot to her feet.

"Objection, Your Honor!

Cross-examination is supposed to be limited to the scope of the direct examination! In my questioning, I only asked about two things: that the incident occurred after sixth period and that the wallet was found in the defendant’s bag. Therefore, the cross-examination should be limited to these two points!"

The audience erupted in murmurs, both loud and soft. Hearing such a long string of sophisticated, legal-sounding objections would surely have impressed everyone, especially since it was their first time witnessing a trial.

"Hmm, indeed, that does seem to be the case. Ms. Satsuki, do you have a counter-argument?"

Ugh, I was at a loss for words.

I hadn’t expected an objection like this right from the start.

If this were someone like that swindling lawyer I know, he’d immediately come up with a clever rebuttal and smoothly counter it. But since this was my first time conducting a trial, I couldn’t even think of a way to start my counter-argument. It’s true that there’s a rule that says, 'The scope of cross-examination should be limited to what was covered in the direct examination'...

But I couldn’t just stay silent forever. I was the representative of Class B, and sitting next to me was Nae, looking anxious. I couldn’t afford to show any weakness.

I couldn’t find a way to counter Uribatake’s objection… But maybe I could at least muddle through this somehow…

Suppressing the turmoil inside me as best as I could, I managed to say:

"Well, maybe my cross-examination slightly strayed from the scope, but is it really necessary to object so fiercely? Is there something you don’t want to be brought up in cross-examination?"

Uribatake clearly hadn’t expected this kind of rebuttal. Her face flushed red with anger, resembling a demon.

"H-How dare you!? How shameless…! I-I am merely trying to uphold the rules of this trial!"

"Oh, really? Then you don’t need to get so worked up about it, do you? Look, everyone’s scared just by looking at your face."

Uribatake’s expression hardened for a brief moment, but then she quickly composed herself, cleared her throat, and within the blink of an eye, returned to her usual prim, lady-like smile. Even I was taken aback by how quickly she changed her demeanor.

"Well, fine. Since Ms. Uribatake seems to be so against it, I’ll stop here. No further questions for this witness."

Somehow, I’d managed to muddle through—internally, I breathed a sigh of relief as I sat back down.

I was glad I had spoken to that swindling lawyer yesterday...

◆

It was after school yesterday, when the incident occurred.

Uribatake, my rival, has an older brother who is a full-blown prosecutor.

I didn’t know if her brother was actually talented, but I was certain that Uribatake had gotten plenty of pointers from him before the class trial—there was no doubt in my mind.

That being the case, I couldn’t just sit idly by while Uribatake soaked up all that knowledge. Naturally, I came to a logical conclusion: if she was getting advice from an active prosecutor, then I should get advice from a practicing criminal defense attorney.

Luckily, I happened to know one lawyer. His name is Zenko Yamashika. Every time he takes on a criminal trial, he manipulates witnesses, completely destroys the prosecution’s arguments,

throws the trial into chaos, and in the confusion, somehow manages to get his clients acquitted—a notorious swindler of a lawyer.

But, admittedly, there are some things to learn from the way he nitpicks.

So, it was only natural that I found myself heading to his law office.

“And that’s why, Zenko, you’re going to teach me the basics of trial procedure! Right now!”

After giving a rough explanation of the situation, I stood with my hands on my hips and proudly made this demand.

Any normal guy would be charmed by my fairy-like cuteness and do whatever I asked.

Unfortunately, the men who hung out at this law office weren’t what you would call “normal.”

"..."

"...*Yawn*..."

Zenko had his arms folded on his desk, resting his chin on them, staring blankly into space as if he were a lifeless husk. And the other social outcast who always loitered around the office—some guy who called himself a private detective named Kageno—just yawned lazily from where he was lying on the client sofa.

“Hey, Zenko! Were you even listening!? A cute, charming girl like me is asking you for a favor! The least you could do is respond properly!”

Zenko slowly lifted his face and muttered:

“Consultation fee: 30 dollars for thirty minutes.”

“G-Grrrr…!”

So that’s how it is!

Of course, it’s always about money, money, money with this guy. This is exactly why I hate capitalist, money-worshipping lawyers. Can’t he feel even a shred of sympathy to help a poor, helpless girl for free? One day, I swear I’ll hit him over the head with Lenin’s collected works.

But for Nae, who was wrongly accused of a crime, I had to get the basics of trial procedure from this lawyer, no matter what. His personality was the absolute worst, and he was a worthless coward, but when it came to criminal trials, he had a flawless win rate—a truly formidable lawyer.

Still, thinking about preparing for the not-so-distant revolution that would bring socialism to this country, I had no intention of paying this guy 30 dollars.

Hmm, I had no choice. Desperate times call for desperate measures.

“Fine, we’ll make a deal! If you agree to help me—"

"...What if I help you?"

“For the next three weeks, I won’t set foot in this office!”

“Deal.”

…His reply was immediate.

He’s not just a cowardly swindler; he’s also a rude lawyer. There’s no saving him.

At any rate, that’s how I managed to get the basics of courtroom procedure from a practicing lawyer.

Zenko said:

“Listen, there are only three techniques you need for witness questioning, as far as I know: baseless assumptions, the three-step argument, and leading questions—those are it.”

◆

“Now then, Ms. Uribatake, call your next witness.”

The judge’s glasses gleamed. There was a rumor that those glasses were actually equipped with some kind of lighting device.

“The next witness is Ms. Okabe Shino.”

This time it was a student from Class A. It seemed Uribatake was finally getting to the heart of the matter.

Once Okabe took the witness stand and finished swearing in, Uribatake immediately began her questioning.

“You were present in the gym class on the day of the incident as well, correct?”

“Yes, I was.”

It must have been rehearsed beforehand, as the girl answered smoothly.

“Well then, could you testify about what you saw before the gym class started?”

“Yes. I was the day’s class monitor, so I had to clean the blackboard from the previous class. That made me a little late changing into my gym clothes.”

“I see, so you were late changing. And then?”

“I thought I’d be the last one to leave the locker room for Class B, but there was still someone else from Class B changing.”

“And that was Ms. Nae Tamura, correct?”

“Yes.”

“In other words, she was the last one to leave the classroom, wasn’t she?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“By the way, when Ms. Kondo mentioned that her wallet was missing, you told everyone about this, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I did. I told them that Ms. Tamura was the last one to leave the classroom.”

Nae, sitting next to me, had her head completely down.

She wasn’t the type of girl who had a lot of inner strength. If this went on much longer, she might start crying. I wanted to do something, but...

“Thank you, that’s all for my questions.”

Uribatake smiled brightly, as if showing off for the boys around her.

At school, I was by far the most popular girl, but, unfortunately, Uribatake wasn’t exactly lacking in the looks department either. On top of that, her family was wealthy. And, as much as I hated to admit it, her figure was slightly better than mine. With a smile like that from her… some of the boys would easily fall for it.

But there was no way I could lose to a girl whose chest had grown at the expense of her brain.

“Ms. Satsuki, you may begin your cross-examination.”

I stood up straight.

If she was going all out, then I had to be thorough too. But—

I suddenly remembered my conversation with Zenko.

“Hey, Zenko. What exactly is a leading question?”

Zenko answered bluntly.

“A question in which the desired answer is implied by the question itself.”

“T-That’s too abstract! I don’t get it at all! Explain it more concretely!”

“Is that how you ask someone for help? You’ve got some nerve, especially when you’re not paying me a single cent…”

Suddenly, Kageno, who had supposedly been napping on the sofa, sat up lazily and muttered:

“She’s got a big attitude to make up for her lack of comprehension.”

“What did you say!?”

I shook my head. No, no, that’s not the part I need to be remembering right now.

“If you want an example of a leading question… Hmm, it’s a bit extreme, but here’s one: asking a witness, ‘Generally speaking, you think it’s wrong to steal, don’t you?’ That’s a leading question. If you ask it that way, anyone would have no choice but to answer ‘yes.’ And anyone who hears that question, not just the witness, but even the jury and the audience, will start thinking, ‘Yeah, stealing is wrong.’ That’s how a leading question works—it steers everyone in the direction you want them to go.”

I didn’t fully understand all of it. But I do remember what Zenko said afterward.

“Well, in my opinion, whenever the prosecution calls a witness and questions them, it’s always a leading question. Think about it: the whole point of witness questioning is to make the witness give the answer the questioner wants. No matter how you do it, it’s going to be leading.

What I’m trying to say is this: when the prosecution calls a witness, they already know exactly what they want the witness to say. And what the prosecutor does is set the stage so that the witness can only give that prepared answer—in other words, they lead them.

That’s why any testimony from the prosecution will always sound favorable to their side. But that’s not really the case. There’s always something they don’t want to touch on. So, in cross-examination, you just have to find that point and press on it.”

“And what if I can’t figure out that point they don’t want touched on?”

"Keep questioning until you understand. Dig into every bit of the testimony."

Dig into every bit of the testimony—

“...Oh, now that you mention it…”

Suddenly, it hit me.

Why did Okabe remember who stayed behind after her?

Let’s press her on that. I took a deep breath and began the cross-examination.

“Ms. Okabe, please answer. Normally, during gym class, do you really pay attention to who’s the last one left behind?”

“W-Well, I just happened to remember that time.”

For the first time, her previously smooth answers faltered.

“Is that so? Then answer this, Ms. Okabe. The day before yesterday, there was also gym class, right? Who stayed behind after you then?”

“I-I don’t remember.”

“Then what about last week’s gym class?”

“T-That’s the same! I don’t remember!”

“Oh, really? Then why did you remember Ms. Tamura yesterday? You normally don’t pay attention to stuff like that during gym class, do you?”

“N-No, it’s not like there was a big reason for it…”

I knew it. Now was the time to throw her off balance.

“Look here! The reason Ms. Tamura is being suspected right now is because you said she was the last one in the classroom! You, who normally don’t care about who stays behind, said it was her!

Why did you suddenly care about it yesterday? Could it be that you had a reason to pin the blame on her?”

The classroom buzzed with murmurs, and Okabe’s face changed color.

This is it.

“Hold on a second, Ms. Satsuki!”

Just as I was thinking that, she came at me again. Uribatake stood up sharply and started speaking forcefully.

“Listen here, Ms. Satsuki, and listen well! It’s only natural that this witness remembered Tamura was the last one in the classroom yesterday! That’s because it wasn’t the day before yesterday or last week—it was an event that happened just one day ago! Of course, anyone would still remember something that happened only a day ago! You can’t compare it to events that happened days ago!

And asking if she had any reason to pin the blame on Tamura!? How inappropriate of you to accuse someone who’s providing important testimony to help solve this case!”

The judge lightly adjusted his glasses with his middle finger.

“Calm down, Ms. Uribatake. If you wish to raise an objection, you are allowed to state it. However, you are not permitted to express personal opinions without my permission. Understood?”

“Yes, Your Honor. I lost my composure for a moment.

To everyone here in this classroom, I apologize. Please disregard my previous remarks, as they were inappropriate.”

Uribatake exaggeratedly shrugged her shoulders and said this with a soft tone, then sat back down calmly.

Grr… Damn you, Uribatake. I can’t believe you’d go this far.

I'd finally found a thread to pull on, and now that she's said all that, I can't press her any further…

Ugh, isn't there something else I can do? I tried to gather my thoughts and think of another way.

Zenko said, "If you're stuck, just keep poking." So, I decided to continue questioning.

"Alright then, Ms. Okabe, let's change the question. You said you were late because you were the class monitor, right?"

"Yes, that's right."

"But you're in Class A, aren't you? Class A uses the boys' locker room. Even if you were wiping the blackboard, it shouldn't have made you that late."

I thought it was a solid question, but—

"Even so, it still made me late."

W-Well, that's true. But wait, I can't just accept that.

I tried to maintain my composure and act like I had anticipated that response, then continued my questioning.

"When you left the classroom—when you last saw Nae—what time was that?"

"It was just before the bell rang."

"That's too vague. How many minutes before the bell rang? Please answer more specifically."

I asked casually. Then suddenly, Okabe's face showed signs of hesitation once again.

"W-Well, I don't remember the exact time."

Bingo.

This is it. Now's the time to push harder.

"Oh, you don't remember the exact time!? Then it could've been just one minute before the bell, right?"

"P-Probably around that time…"

"But it could've been three minutes before as well, right?"

“Uh…”

At that moment, the classroom began to stir slightly.

“I object, Your Honor!”

Uribatake stood up and raised her voice.

“The important point in this witness’s testimony is that Ms. Tamura was the last one to leave the classroom! It doesn’t matter how many minutes before the bell it was!”

“Hmm. What do you say to that, Ms. Satsuki?”

This time, I knew exactly how to respond.

“If I’m allowed to continue questioning for a bit longer, you’ll soon see why this question is important!”

“Very well. I’ll allow you to proceed for now.”

I composed myself and continued.

“Alright then, Ms. Okabe. If you really left the classroom just before the bell rang, then yes, it’s possible that Ms. Tamura was the last one there.

But you said you don’t remember exactly when you left the classroom. If it was, say, three minutes before the bell, isn’t it possible that someone else could have entered or exited the classroom after you?”

The murmuring in the classroom grew louder.

“I object! This is a leading question!”

“Objection overruled. Leading questions are permitted during cross-examinations to clarify the witness's memory or correct biases.”

“Grr… Y-You’re right…”

Uribatake muttered in a small voice, clearly frustrated, as she returned to her seat.

“Witness, please answer the question.”

The judge prompted her, but Okabe hesitated to respond, so I spoke up instead.

“Your Honor, it seems that Ms. Okabe is having difficulty answering, so I’ll end it here. That’s all for my cross-examination!”

The classroom fell silent. Surely, everyone must have been impressed by my brilliant performance.

Even if you don’t get a direct answer, just asking the leading question can have an effect—that’s what Zenko’s words meant, and now I finally understood.

“N-Next, I’d like to call Ms. Akemi Kondo to the stand!”

Uribatake spoke, trying to hide the slight unease in her voice.

The next to take the stand was the person directly involved in the incident: Akemi Kondo from Class A, the one who claimed her wallet had been stolen.

“Now then, Ms. Kondo. When you first realized your wallet was missing, the previous witness, Ms. Okabe, said that Ms. Tamura was the last one in the classroom, didn’t she?”

“Yes.”

“And when you heard that, you made a certain suggestion, didn’t you?”

“Yes. I said that during gym class, the teacher is always watching to prevent theft, so it’s unlikely that anyone other than those who were in the classroom could be the culprit. That’s why I said Ms. Tamura, who was the last one to leave, seemed suspicious.”

“And how did Ms. Tamura react?”

“She desperately denied it. She even said we could search all her belongings.”

“I see. And then?”

“When we actually emptied out all of Ms. Tamura’s bag… it came out.”

“What came out?”

“My wallet.”

The classroom fell into a deep silence. For me and Nae, it was an uncomfortable silence.

“By the way, this wallet of yours is the one right here, correct?”

Uribatake pulled out a wallet from somewhere.

“Yes, that’s it. It’s a popular wallet these days. It has yellow stripes, and though it looks small, it can hold a lot of cards—it's a really good wallet.”

“Your Honor, the prosecution would like to submit this wallet as evidence.”

“Very well. I will temporarily accept it.”

Uribatake was already acting like a full-fledged prosecutor. I didn’t know why she was handing over the wallet to the judge, as there was no need for a forensic examination or anything.

“That concludes my direct examination.”

“Very well. Ms. Satsuki, you may begin your cross-examination.”

I stood up quietly.

This is the critical moment. Why did the wallet actually come out of Nae’s bag? Unless I figure that out, there’s no chance of victory.

I tried to recall Zenko’s words for the third time.

"Hey Zenko, what would you do if completely undeniable, decisive evidence came out against you?"

Zenko answered calmly.

"As far as I know, I’ve never once encountered such evidence."

"T-That’s just hypothetical, come on!"

When I got a little worked up, Zenko once again calmly replied.

"Just make something up. It doesn’t matter what. Fabricate a reason and pull off a trick.

Listen, let’s say some damning evidence comes out. That evidence might be impossible to refute. Then, change your perspective. Why did that evidence appear? Why did it come to light? If you keep digging into that, somewhere, you’ll find an element of coincidence. Once you do, make up an excuse for that coincidence."

Ugh, it’s hard to understand what he’s talking about…

As if sensing my confusion, Kageno interjected in a sleepy voice.

"In short, if some damning evidence comes out, claim that it was planted by someone... to muddy the waters."

This time, I sort of understood.

I understood... but if that’s the case, another doubt arises.

"T-Then, what if the evidence really did come out by coincidence!? Wouldn’t that mean you’re falsely accusing the person who found the evidence!?"

Zenko and Kageno exchanged confused looks, as if they couldn’t understand why I was asking such a thing. Then, in unison, they said as if it were the most natural thing in the world:

"So what?"

I think I now have an idea of what I should be questioning here.

"Ms. Kondo, I’d like you to testify in more detail about the situation when the wallet was found. What kind of expression did Ms. Tamura have at that moment?"

"W-What kind of expression? Well... she seemed really surprised."

"Really surprised! I see.

For example, if someone found a wallet in their bag that they didn’t even know was there, wouldn’t they be really surprised like that?"

Before Kondo could even react, Uribatake stood up.

"Objection! The defense is forcing their own baseless assumptions onto the witness!"

Before the judge could make a ruling, I shrugged and continued.

"Alright, let’s change the question. Isn’t it possible to imagine something like this? Someone steals your wallet. Then they put that wallet into Nae’s bag. After that, they create a situation where she has to show what’s inside her bag, making her the suspect—"

As the classroom buzzed with murmurs, Uribatake shouted angrily.

"Y-Your Honor! I object! This is a malicious question, deliberately trying to entrap the witness!"

"Objection sustained. Defense, please change the question."

"Very well. That's all for my cross-examination."

I see, I thought.

So this is how you do cross-examination.

By adding a different interpretation to the prosecution's evidence and witnesses, the people listening will start to come to their own conclusions.

"Ms. Uribatake, call your next witness."

Uribatake stood up abruptly, her tone slightly irritated.

"The prosecution rests their case! I believe we've made it perfectly clear through the previous witnesses just how suspicious the defendant Ms. Tamura is!"

"Very well. We will now move on to the defense's witnesses. But first, I'd like to take a ten-minute recess. Any objections? No? Then, we'll take a recess."

The judge banged a ballpoint pen on the teacher's desk, making a loud *bang*.

Taking this as their cue, the classroom quickly filled with chatter. Around me, several students from Class B, looking somewhat satisfied, gathered.

"As expected of our Iyo! That cross-examination was amazing!"

"Even Uribatake was totally caught off guard, it was hilarious!"

"Iyo, keep peeling away her mask, okay?"

They all said one thing after another. I puffed out my chest proudly.

"Don't worry, you can leave it to me! Now it's our turn to make them sweat!"

Cheers and words of encouragement rose up again from the group around me.

I smiled outwardly, but inside, my mind was racing.

With my cross-examination so far, I think I've managed to weaken some of the suspicion...

But unless I figure out why the wallet was in Nae's bag, I don't think we'll land a decisive blow.

Nae couldn't have stolen it. So that means someone else must have secretly put it in her bag. When? Who? How...?

In the first place, how could someone have pulled off such a thing in this classroom with the teacher watching?

"...That's it."

As I reached that point in my thoughts, something suddenly occurred to me.

"Hm? What's up, Iyo?"

One of my friends, Yui Ayasaki, asked curiously.

"Hey everyone, could I see your wallets for a second?"

Although they all looked puzzled, they showed me their wallets. After confirming something, I walked over to the judge.

"Alright, let's resume the trial."

The judge declared, banging the ballpoint pen on the desk again.

Even though I'd made that suggestion during the break, he still hadn't changed his expression at all—impressive, in a way.

"Ms. Satsuki, call your witness."

"As the next defense witness, I'd like to call the victim, Ms. Kondo, to the stand once again."

Before long, Kondo, still looking a bit sullen, took the stand.

"Your Honor, could I borrow the wallet that was submitted as evidence?"

At my request, the judge simply said, "Very well," and passed me the wallet.

"Ms. Kondo, this is your wallet, right?"

"Yes, it is."

"Do you remember how much money was in it when it went missing?"

Kondo blushed a little.

"I-I do remember, but I'm not going to say it here."

"Don't worry, I'm not asking you to testify to that. But, when the wallet was returned to you, was there anything missing?"

"N-No."

"Nothing was missing?"

"T-That's right."

"Isn't that a bit strange? If someone stole a wallet, wouldn't you think they'd at least remove the contents?"

Uribatake stood up angrily.

"Objection! This is nothing but baseless speculation!"

"Objection sustained. Defense, change the question."

"Understood."

I shrugged as I replied. Now, the real show begins.

"Ms. Kondo, I'm going to hand you this wallet. Would you mind checking the contents?"

"W-Well, okay, but..."

Looking puzzled, Kondo took the wallet from me and opened it.

In the next instant, her face turned to one of shock.

"M-My money's gone! And so is the phone card I treasured!"

The classroom—no, the courtroom—immediately erupted with murmurs.

I grinned.

"Don’t worry, Ms. Kondo. Your wallet with all its contents is still with the judge."

"Indeed."

The judge pulled out another wallet with yellow stripes from the desk. Not just Kondo and Uribatake, but everyone in the room was stunned.

"Y-Your Honor! W-What on earth is going on here!?"

Uribatake, clearly rattled, shouted.

I answered in the judge’s place.

"There’s something I owe everyone here an apology for. Well, the judge will explain the details."

"Indeed. Earlier, the defense made a proposal to me. They wanted to verify whether the wallet found in the victim’s bag was truly hers. To do so, they requested to swap it with a different wallet that looked identical."

I continued where the judge left off, speaking to Kondo, who couldn’t hide her surprise.

"Ms. Kondo, you just testified that this wallet is a recent trend, right? If it's trendy, that means a lot of them are in circulation, correct? In other words, you're not the only one who could have this kind of wallet. The wallet you’re holding right now belongs to Ms. Ayasaki from our class."

"B-but! The wallet that came out of Ms. Tamura’s bag back then was definitely mine! Even my medical insurance card was in there!"

"Exactly, Ms. Satsuki! This experiment is completely useless! The fact that Ms. Kondo’s wallet was found—that reality can’t be changed!"

Uribatake, too, had lost her composure and protested.

I ignored the two of them and turned back toward the judge.

"Your Honor, the defense has sent someone to bring in a witness. Until that witness arrives, we’d like a little time."

"Very well. Let’s take a short recess—"

Just then, a teacher was led into the room by one of my classmates.

It was Ms. Junko Kobayashi. She specializes in science. She's an elderly teacher, nearing retirement. She's also very experienced, and no matter how difficult a student might be—even someone like me, or even Uribatake or Yamato—she could easily handle them.

Ms. Kobayashi looked around at the classroom, now set up like a courtroom, and spoke in her usual easygoing manner.

"My, my, what's going on here, everyone? Gathering in a classroom after school like this, all lined up as if it's a trial. Am I supposed to be a witness?"

I ignored the teacher's confusion and asked her directly.

"Ms. Kobayashi, yesterday during sixth period, we had P.E. class. You were watching over this classroom, weren't you?"

"Yes, that's right. I was working on the upcoming midterm exam questions here. Is everyone preparing properly?"

There were groans of despair from the audience.

Please, Ms. Kobayashi, don't remind us that midterms are coming up. We don't need that kind of reality check right now.

"A-anyway, do you recognize this wallet?"

I held up the same wallet from earlier.

"Oh, yes, I do. Yesterday, when I came into the classroom, this wallet was lying next to Ayasaki's desk. I remembered it because I'd noticed Ayasaki's wallet during the last field trip. I thought, 'Ah, this is the kind of wallet young people carry these days.' I figured she must've dropped it while changing, so I put it in her bag for her.

Oh dear, could it have been someone else's wallet? If so, I'm terribly sorry. I didn't check the contents because I felt it would be rude."

"Ms. Kobayashi, do you remember where Ayasaki's desk is?"

"Yes. It's the second seat from the front in the third row from the right, isn't it?"

The audience stirred slightly. It was mostly the students from Class B who reacted.

"Ms. Kobayashi, that's actually Tamura's seat."

"Oh, is it? I’m sorry, I’ve been forgetting little details like that more often lately, probably because of my age.

Oh my, Uribatake, why the long face? You look like you’ve just burned out."

◆

That afternoon after school—

"And that’s how, in the end, I emerged victorious! Well, it seemed like everyone knew from the start that I would win. I mean, there was no way I could lose!

The moment when Uribatake had to bow her head was priceless! In the end, Nae defused the situation by saying, ‘Mistakes happen to everyone,’ so it all kind of ended halfway through, but...

Hey, are you guys even listening!?"

I had gone out of my way to visit them just to share the results of the trial. This was at the Yamashika Law Office.

But, despite the fact that the sun was already setting, the inhabitants of the office were just lazing around like opium addicts in a den.

"Hey, Satsuki. Didn’t you promise not to come here for three weeks?"

Zenko said with a sleepy expression.

"What’s with you? I’m a cute student who came all the way to report the results to you, you know!? Where’s my ‘Well done’ or my ‘Here’s 50 dollars as a reward’ or something!?"

"..."

Zenko slumped over his desk. What a rude lawyer.

"Anyway, Zenko, there’s something I wanted to ask you."

"…I don’t care. Go home."

I ignored him and continued.

"I have a rough idea of what a leading question is. And I get what you mean by making stuff up. But I still don’t quite get the whole syllogism thing. What’s the difference between making something up and a syllogism, anyway?"

"…If I explain it to you, will you leave?"

"Sure, I'll go. So, what is it?"

Zenko scratched his head in annoyance, but eventually, he started to speak.

"Alright, listen. In some ways, a syllogism and making stuff up are pretty similar. If you really wanted to differentiate them, I'd say you use 'making stuff up' when you're trying to deceive someone. A syllogism… well, depending on the situation, you use it to leap to a conclusion in your own thinking."

"I still don't get it. Can't you explain it in more concrete terms?"

Zenko clicked his tongue in frustration and then started to speak quickly.

"Alright, I'll tell you a famous joke. Just accept it as your answer.

There were two men. One of them asked the other,

'What is logic?'

The other man replied,

'I'll show you. Do you have a lawnmower?'

'Yes, I do.'

'Then that means you have a large yard, right?'

'Yes, I have a large yard.'

'That means you must live in a house, right?'

'That's right, I live in a house.'

'And if you live in a house, then you must have a family, right?'

'That's right, I have a wife and two kids.'

'Which means you're not gay, right?'

'That's right, I'm not gay.'

'And that, my friend, is logic.'

The other man nodded and said, ‘I see.’"

I tilted my head in confusion. What’s this guy talking about all of a sudden?

"…And so? What does that have to do with syllogisms?"

"Just listen to the end of the story. Hey, Kageno!"

Zenko called out to the useless detective who, as usual, was lying on the couch.

"…What is it?"

"Do you have a lawnmower?"

"Of course not."

Zenko grinned.

"Then you must be gay!"

(My First Trial — End)

正しいカードの使い方？

The Proper Use of Credit Cards?

It was a scene I had been seeing frequently at the house I shared with my brother—just the two of us living together, apart from our parents due to their work commitments. I am Kayo Okada.

"Oh, by the way, Okada, about those 20 dollars I lent you the other day. It would be great if you could return it soon..."

My brother's friend, as he was about to leave our house, brought it up awkwardly at the entrance. My brother—Osamu Okada, a second-year university student—responded:

"Sorry! My wallet's a little empty right now, could you wait just a bit longer? I'm begging you, really!"

As usual, my brother was bowing his head and apologizing profusely.

"Oh, no, it's fine. It's just 20 dollars. You can pay me back whenever…"

"Thanks, man, I really owe you one. I'll pay you back as soon as I've got some extra cash!"

And just like that, my brother once again succeeded in escaping from his kind-hearted debtor without any trouble.

After his friend left, the apologetic attitude my brother had shown just moments before was gone, and he arrogantly said:

"Hah, like I'm ever gonna pay him back!"

I couldn't help but look up at the ceiling in exasperation. My brother, how shameful can you be?

My brother has two faces.

One face is that of a kind person who easily gets along with everyone, helping any friend in need and listening to their problems.

The other face is the one that borrows money from those friends and never pays it back.

The amounts he borrows are usually small, from as little as 10 dollars to at most 60, not exactly large sums. Because of this, his friends, who felt indebted to him for his kindness, would easily lend him the money.

Some of them, even though they didn’t have much to give, would go out of their way to help him, feeling they owed him for all the advice he had given them. They all believed my brother when he said, "I’ll definitely pay you back."

However, my brother always found some excuse to delay repayment and never returned a single cent. He had no intention of paying anyone back from the very beginning. My brother’s kindness toward people was all just a way to borrow money from them.

Perhaps because they felt indebted to him, none of his friends ever pressed him too hard for repayment when it was only a few dollars. My brother’s method of borrowing small amounts from people after making them feel obliged to him was, I had to admit, quite clever.

Still, there were some who got furious and tried to get their money back no matter what. But my brother never intended to return the money. In the end, when they persisted, he would say something like, "I don’t remember borrowing any money. Do you have an IOU?" and shamelessly deny everything.

Some of the victims even consulted lawyers. But apparently, that didn’t help at all. When I asked why, puzzled, my brother proudly explained, laughing:

"You know how old I am, right?"

"Nineteen, right?"

"Exactly. Since I’m still a minor, any contract I make without parental consent can be voided. So no matter how much I borrow, the contract is invalid."

…There’s no way things could work that easily, I thought. If just being a minor could erase your debts, how would the economy survive with all these college students?

I decided to try and counter my brother with some knowledge I’d recently picked up from the news.

"But if a minor causes trouble, isn’t the responsibility supposed to fall on the parents? If Dad finds out what you’ve been doing, he’s not going to just let it slide, you know?"

But my brother remained calm.

"That only applies to kids under eighteen. Once you’re eighteen or nineteen, it’s harder to hold the parents responsible. Nineteen is basically an adult. You can drink and smoke once you hit twenty, after all. But legally, I’m still a minor, so any contracts I make without parental consent are void."

I couldn’t help but find myself nodding in understanding.

"Where'd you learn something like that?"

"TV. There've been a lot of shows with lawyers on them lately, right? I was flipping through channels and happened to catch some lawyer talking about it."

…Of course, he didn't go out of his way to research it himself. That's just like my brother, I thought, feeling a bit exasperated.

Still, apparently, there was some truth to it. Lawyers didn't like getting involved in these kinds of petty cases between students. As a result, my brother's friends, who had lent him money, had no choice but to give up. I had to admit, my brother's cunning in these matters was rather impressive.

"But you're turning twenty next month, right? You won't be able to use that excuse anymore."

"Eh, once next month comes, I'll just come up with a new trick. I've been able to get money this easily so far; there must be plenty of other ways to do it."

He laughed nonchalantly as he spoke.

But I thought to myself—

If he keeps going like this, eventually he's going to lose all his friends. That would be his own fault, but if he ever gets himself mixed up in some serious trouble involving money, our family would become a laughingstock.

Before that happens, I, as his little sister, have to make him change his ways—I made up my mind right then. My idiot brother needs to experience a little pain to learn his lesson.

But, unfortunately, I was just a second-year middle school student. There was no way I could handle my brother, a university student, on my own.

What should I do...? As I started to worry, a certain friend came to mind.

That friend—well, I'm not exactly sure how—but apparently, she had a lawyer at her beck and call.

Her name is Iyo Satsuki.

◆

"Hey, Yamashika."

Kageno, who had been lounging on the client sofa, spoke up, sounding thoughtful.

"...What is it?"

I responded lazily, my feet propped up on the desk.

"This law office of yours... still doesn't have any clients, huh?"

"...Just so you know, it's not that I don't have any requests. I'm just picky about the clients I take on."

"So, basically, you're still bored."

"..."

I found myself at a loss for words.

Kageno was right. Unfortunately, my Yamashika Law Office was once again open yet devoid of clients today. The reason for this was my policy of only taking on complicated murder cases. I turned away any client who brought me a case that didn't pique my interest.

As a result, fewer and fewer clients brought in cases I didn't like—divorces, inheritance disputes, that sort of thing—and I no longer had to come up with excuses to turn them down. It was a small relief.

That was all well and good, but the fact that fewer and fewer people were visiting my office was starting to become a problem. A law office with no clients doesn't exactly make for great public relations. And I vaguely remembered something about lawyers being encouraged to "work actively for the good of society." But with the current situation, where the only "client" coming in was some half-baked detective who waltzed in during the day because he didn't want to waste his own air conditioning, things were looking pretty grim.

Maybe it was time to stop being so picky and take on some routine work for a change—just as I was starting to think that, the door to the office opened without so much as a knock.

"Hey, a client. Lucky you, Yamashika."

Kageno teased.

I had almost forgotten. There was one other person besides Kageno who regularly showed up at this office.

No, I couldn’t call her a client. This brat who visited my Yamashika Law Office as if to kill time, spreading nothing but troublesome issues that weren’t worth a penny—this communist-obsessed kid.

"Zenko~! I’ve brought you some work~!"

That kid—Iyo Satsuki—said this as she dragged along a girl who looked like her classmate, wearing the same uniform.

The girl was a bit taller than Satsuki. Her skirt was unusually short, and her handbag was adorned with jangling accessories. Her hair was short, and she looked lively, like the type of kid who’d spend the whole day hanging out around Harajuku on weekends.

A cramped, dim office with the word "Law" in its name. Inside, a young lawyer and a shady-looking detective. If a middle-schooler walked into such a place, they’d usually hesitate at least a little, but as the saying goes, "birds of a feather flock together." Satsuki’s companion seemed quite bold and showed no signs of being confused or lost.

Of course, they didn’t look like the kind of clients who would pay a high legal fee, either.

"Hey, Yamashika."

Seeing the two visitors, Kageno muttered.

"...What?"

"Why don’t you hang a sign that says ‘Child Consultation Center’ instead of ‘Law Office’ starting tomorrow? You’d probably get more clients that way."

I decided to ignore him.

"Um, are you Mr. Yamashika?"

The girl spoke. I could have ignored her too, but unlike that unruly communist brat, her tone was polite, and she even added "Mr." at the end, so I reconsidered and figured I could at least give her a little attention.

"Yeah, that’s me."

"My name is Kayo Okada. I’ve come to consult with you, Mr. Yamashika—"

I was about to deeply regret my casual response.

The girl who introduced herself as Kayo Okada began rambling on about things I hadn’t even asked for. Apparently, her older brother had been borrowing money from friends, making excuses, and not paying back a single cent, earning ill will from all sides. She couldn’t let things go on like this, but as a middle schooler, she couldn’t persuade her brother to change—

"And that’s why... please, tell me how I can teach my idiot brother a lesson! I’m begging you!"

She bowed her head.

Despite her "I’m begging you" plea, her attitude was strong-willed, befitting a friend of Satsuki. I suppose it takes that kind of personality to come to a strange lawyer and ask for help in punishing your own brother.

"Zenko, you know what to do, right? I went out of my way to bring you this client, so make sure you treat her well!"

Satsuki said smugly.

It might be an important issue for the Okada family, but to me, it was nothing more than an unbearably dull, trivial matter. I rested my chin on my hands on the desk and couldn’t stifle a large yawn.

"Hey, Zenko! Don’t you dare yawn in front of a client!"

Satsuki shouted angrily, slamming her fist on the desk. But it was a rather flashy hit, and she seemed to have overdone it, grimacing slightly in pain. It was a bit pathetic, to be honest.

"Recently, I’ve been thinking..."

I said thoughtfully.

"...What?"

"Have you mistaken me for Doraemon or something? Why do I have to help out with every trivial thing that doesn’t earn me a single cent?"

"Hah! Don’t flatter yourself! If you were Doraemon, I’d be asking you to help me conquer the world!"

Well, she had a point—I had to admit. But what she said next wasn’t so great.

"But you’re at best a convenient servant!"

"...Sigh."

There it is.

Dealing with this brat any longer was a waste of time, so I decided to say my usual line and be done with it.

"Consultation fee is 30 dollars for every thirty minutes."

"There it is again!?" As expected, Satsuki flinched. "Don't you have any conscience!? Asking for money from a distressed beautiful girl—what kind of adult does that!?"

"Helping out a troubled kid just because they're in trouble isn't what adults do. You've got to teach them a little self-reliance.

Now, if you can't pay, that's that. You'd better get going—"

Before I could finish my sentence, I froze.

The kid who called herself Kayo Okada was holding up her right hand, pointing it straight at me. Clutched in her hand were—pieces of paper with the portraits of these old-timers on it.

"Here, 30 dollars! This is enough for a consultation, right!?"

"Kayo!? There's no need to pay so much money to a pathetic lawyer like this!"

"It's fine, Iyo. I took the money from my idiot brother's wallet anyway. So, Mr. Yamashika, this should cover the consultation, right!? You said so earlier, didn't you!?"

"Uh... y-yeah, I suppose..."

I nodded, flustered by her strong tone.

"Alright, then! Please, tell me how I can make my idiot brother change his ways! I don't mind if he has to suffer a little—he's my brother, so I'll allow it!"

She forcefully shoved the dollar bills into my hand.

The saying "regret always comes too late" couldn't have been more fitting. I scratched my head awkwardly.

"Well, even if you ask me how to make him change his ways... It's not like everyone adjusts their life just because someone scolds them. If people were that easily swayed, there'd be no crime in the world."

"What are you talking about!? You're not going to back out after taking 30 dollars, are you!? I'll sue you for fraud!"

Satsuki yelled from the side. She was as loud and annoying as always.

Her being loud was nothing new, but it got even worse when money was involved. It's ironic, really—she calls herself a communist, but her personality seems more suited to capitalism.

I ignored Satsuki and asked Okada:

"So, your brother is nineteen, right?"

"Yes, that's right."

"And he'll be turning twenty soon?"

"Yes, next month."

"Wait, really!?" Satsuki said in surprise. "Then he won't be able to nullify his debts by claiming to be a minor anymore, right!?"

"Yeah, I thought so too. But that idiot brother of mine is already bragging that once that happens, he'll just come up with some other trick."

"I figured. Once someone gets a taste of easy money, they're not gonna give it up so easily—especially when they're young."

The notion that debts made by minors could be invalidated wasn't wrong. And the fact that it's hard to hold parents accountable for a nineteen-year-old was also true. On top of that, since this was just a small-scale personal loan, no lawyer would want to get involved. Unless there were dozens of victims and they all banded together with power of attorney, no one would waste their time on a few tens of dollars.

This isn't just true for lawyers, but for any professional. There's nothing more irritating than a novice who thinks they know everything after skimming some basic knowledge of your field.

Law is the prime example of this. These days, anyone can turn on the TV and find legal loopholes. Young people who don't know how harsh the world really is often act like they're experts after picking up a few legal tidbits. But most of the time, using knowledge they learned overnight won't end well for them.

...Wait a minute.

At that moment, an idea popped into my head.

If he’s about to turn twenty—that means I can use *that*. And from what I’ve heard, this kid’s brother only gets his legal knowledge from TV shows...

"There’s one way, actually, to punish someone who’s racked up debts and is living it up without paying them back. Have you ever heard of credit cards?"

"I know what that is!" Satsuki spat out for some reason. "It's a debt-creating card born from the distortions of a capitalist society, where you can delay your payments and still shop, right?"

"...Well, you're not wrong.

So, when you turn twenty, especially if you're a second or third-year university student, it's actually pretty easy to get a credit card. The credit limit is probably around 600 dollars, but in two or three years, when you get a job, you'll be spending a lot more. So, they let you get used to using it as a kind of advertisement.

Also, there's this thing called bankruptcy in society. To put it simply, it's a system where you can have your debts erased in exchange for giving up all your assets. Given the times we live in, you've probably at least heard of it, right?"

The two of them nodded, so I continued.

"But there are some rules when it comes to bankruptcy. For example, your house, real estate, and any other valuable possessions will be seized. However, household items—what you’d call necessities—won’t be taken. That includes things like TVs and computers. Though, that's only if you don't own more than one of each.

That said, a university student probably doesn’t have any assets worth worrying about, so in theory, you could borrow a ton of money, party it all away, and then declare bankruptcy."

"...What the hell? That doesn't sound like much of a punishment."

"Listen to the whole story. The thing I want to point out is that bankruptcy is a well-known system, and most people think it means you can wipe out your debts. So, what do you think will happen if you tell that to your law-obsessed brother?"

"Well, that’s obvious," Okada said. "Knowing my brother, he’ll probably think it’s fine to go bankrupt and happily max out his credit cards."

I grinned.

"Exactly. But here's the catch—there’s a procedure you need to follow to actually get your debts erased through bankruptcy—"

Fifteen minutes later—

After hearing my explanation, the two kids left, looking satisfied.

And in my hand was the 30 dollars consultation fee for thirty minutes. Well, considering I made 30 dollars from such a simple consultation, it wasn't a bad job at all, I thought, when suddenly—

"Hey, Yamashika."

Out of nowhere, Kageno, who had been lying quietly on the sofa until now, muttered.

"...What is it?"

"Is it really okay for a lawyer to give advice on how to trick people? What about that code of ethics you’re supposed to follow?"

"..."

I couldn’t say a word in response.

◆

"So, where should we go next?"

My brother asked us after settling the bill with his brand-new credit card.

It was a Sunday at the department store. At the restaurant on the top floor, Iyo and I were treated to a Special Deluxe Strawberry Parfait that cost 20 dollars each. It was a thank-you gift for telling him about bankruptcy.

"Big brother~, there's a book I really want~."

Hearing Iyo's sweet, kitten-like voice, I couldn’t help but cringe.

"Alright, I’ll buy you as many books as you want."

"You're the best, big brother! Let’s go!"

Iyo took my brother’s hand and started walking, and I followed behind, my face twitching slightly.

Yesterday, Iyo had said to me:

"I hate sucking up to people. But this time, I'll help you reform your brother! I'll throw away my pride and dignity for this!"

At the time, I was moved by Iyo's friendship. But now, watching her fawn over my brother, I couldn't help but wonder why it didn't look like she was doing it reluctantly at all. Come to think of it, when we went to the bookstore together before, she was eyeing an 85-dollars book titled "The Glorious Path to the Soviet Union"...

However, the real hopeless case is my idiot brother.

This idiot, five years older than me, was being called "big brother" by a middle schooler—my friend, no less—and he didn't seem to mind at all. In fact, he was grinning like an idiot.

I couldn't help but look up at the sky. It was pathetic. Absolutely pathetic. Sure, Iyo is cute, but for him to be completely wrapped around the finger of a middle schooler? That's just too pathetic. And on top of that, what my idiot brother is relying on is the idea of "debts you don't have to repay"—something that should never even exist in the first place.

To bring this hopeless idiot of a brother back to the straight and narrow, I'll have to carry out our plan and make him suffer a bit. Thinking that way, getting my brother to buy me things like Iyo is part of the plan. This is all for my brother's own good.

"Brother, there's a dress I want, too."

For my brother's sake, I steeled myself and said it.

"Sure, leave it to me. So, after the bookstore, it's the clothing department."

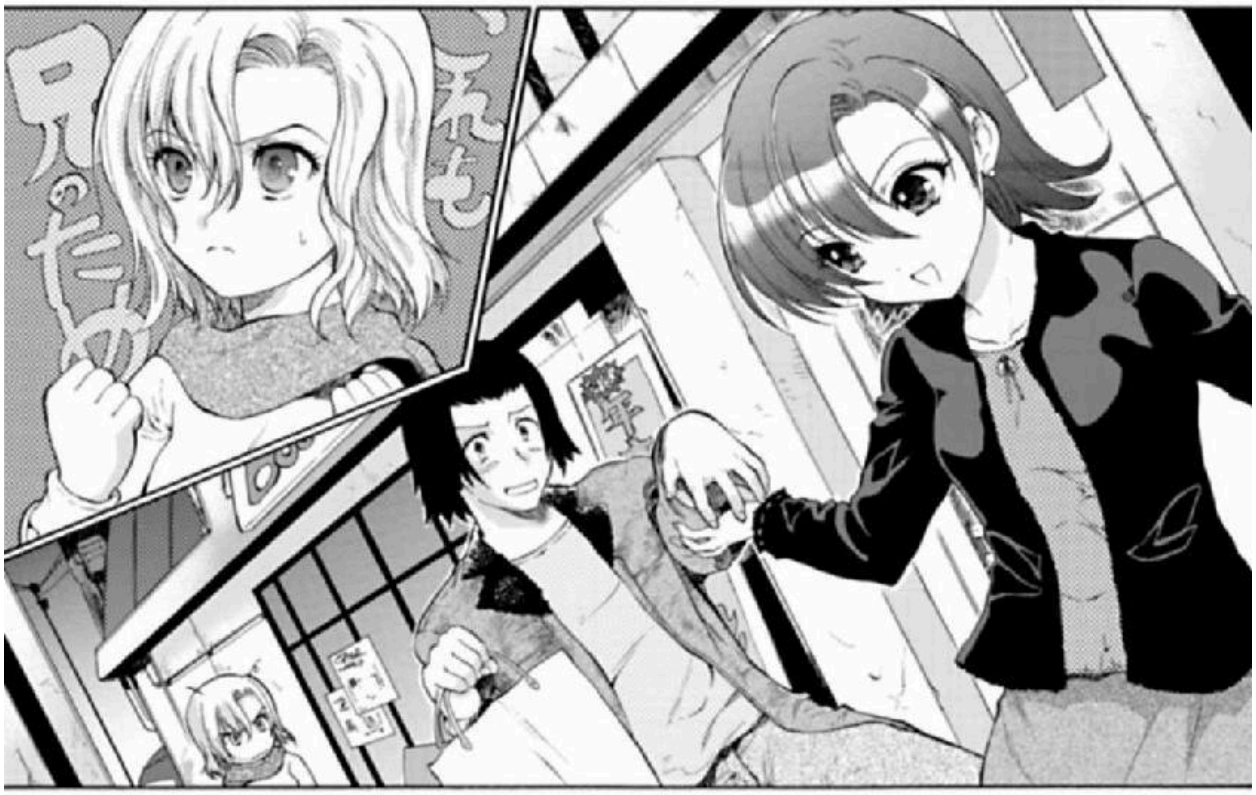
Without even noticing our exchange of glances, my brother nodded easily.

Even as I felt ashamed of him, I desperately racked my brain. Let's see, I want clothes, and while I'm at it, I need new shoes... and maybe a new watch, too.

This is all for my brother's own good.

◆

Three months passed uneventfully, and one afternoon—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"Zenko~, I brought her again!"

The communist-obsessed brat showed up at my office with Kayo Okada, and I felt my stomach ache for the first time in three months.

"Mr. Yamashika, it went exactly as planned!" Okada said gleefully. "In the past three months, my idiot brother has been making credit cards left and right, using them all over the place! And now, he can't borrow any more money, and none of his cards work anymore, so he's being hounded by debt collectors every day!"

"Oh, uh, that's... good, I guess."

My advice had successfully ruined someone's life.

"And now, he's completely resigned to going bankrupt, and he's looking for a lawyer... So, I was wondering if you, Mr. Yamashika, who knows the situation, could help him. He doesn't have any money, but can you please take the case?"

"Zenko~, you're not going to turn her down now, are you? And if you try to extort a huge fee from a girl in distress again, I won't let you get away with it!"

'There's no way I'm going to take on the hassle of dealing with a bankruptcy case for that kind of fee!'—that's what I would normally say, and dismiss the whole thing.

But this time, it wasn't so simple.

"Alright, I'll do it. I've already gotten myself involved, so I'll take care of it. I'll charge a fee, but I won't take it from you guys. I'll get it from your brother, maybe in installments or something. Does that work?"

The two of them exchanged glances, seemingly surprised that I agreed so easily.

"...Zenko~, it's rare for you to actually go out of your way to help someone. You're not planning something shady, are you?"

"N-No, of course not. I'll make some money from it, and, well, I've been pretty bored lately."

"Hmm. Well, if you say so."

Whether I declined or accepted, they'd make a fuss either way. What am I supposed to do?

That said, I did have my own ulterior motive.

If they went to another lawyer, there was a chance that it would come out that I had given advice on how to ruin someone's life. As it is, I'm already on thin ice with that whole "code of ethics" thing, constantly being told, "If you don't want to lose your law license, start working properly."

Regret comes too late, as they say.

The next day, the man showed up.

Medium build, no particularly notable physical features. But as soon as he stepped into the office, he flashed a pleasant smile.

"Um, are you Mr. Yamashika, the lawyer?"

He spoke politely.

There's no way this guy, who's supposedly borrowed money from all his friends and is almost bankrupt from using his credit cards, could be the same person.

"Yeah, I've heard about you. You're Osamu Okada, right?"

"Yes, that's me. My sister introduced me to you..."

Since standing around and talking wasn't ideal, I guided him to the sofa I use for clients. By the way, the crappy detective isn't around today because he figured, "This is going to be a boring conversation."

"So, you want to declare bankruptcy, is that right?"

"Yes, that's right. A lot has happened, and now I've racked up so much debt that I can't possibly pay it off on my own."

Despite his words, his tone didn't sound particularly serious.

"How much are we talking about?"

"About 10 thousand dollars."

"Oh, well now..."

Internally, I was both amazed and somewhat impressed.

A clueless college student, barely twenty years old, had managed to accumulate 10 thousand dollars in debt in just three months. The fact that he borrowed so much is one thing, but what were the lenders even thinking?

"Is there a problem...?"

Okada asked, looking concerned, probably noticing my complicated expression. Since he had apparently been borrowing from everywhere and confidently shirking his repayments, I thought he'd have more guts, but perhaps not.

"There is one problem. You don't have enough debt for bankruptcy."

"N-Not enough? What do you mean!?"

"To be granted bankruptcy, there are certain conditions, one of which is whether or not you can realistically pay it off within about three years of working. You're still young, and with 10 thousand dollars, you could probably pay it back if you put your all into a part-time job for three years. So, bankruptcy might not be approved."

"T-That's ridiculous! Are you telling me I need to get into more debt just to declare bankruptcy!? That's impossible! All the credit card companies have already blocked my cards!"

"Oh, is that so? Well, don't worry. If you really look, there are still plenty of places that will lend you money. The latest trend is loan sharks, for instance."

Okada's face twisted in fear.

"B-But wouldn't those kinds of places have really harsh collection methods?"

"Yeah, they'd be tough. You've probably heard about it on the news—showing up at your house day and night, sending you food deliveries you didn't order, threatening to make you sell a kidney... the list goes on."

Okada's face turned pale. His expression was so amusing that I had to stifle my laughter.

What I was saying wasn't wrong. But there was a bit of a catch.

He was still young and had plenty of working years ahead of him. If he worked part-time or whatever, he could probably pay off 10 thousand dollars in three years. So, technically, bankruptcy wouldn't be approved. That much was true.

However, he was still a student. Obviously, he didn't have any regular income. Even the court wouldn't tell a student to abandon their studies just to work. Given that, even if a student's debt

was as low as, say, 3 thousand dollars, bankruptcy could still be approved. Of course, this was only the official stance, and there were likely plenty of exceptions.

I continued speaking. There were still more pitfalls when it came to bankruptcy.

"Well, let's put the amount of debt aside for now.

More importantly, even if your bankruptcy is approved, that doesn't mean your debt will automatically disappear. You know that, right?"

Okada looked like a pigeon that had just been hit by a slingshot.

"N-No, this is the first I've heard of it..."

"I see. Well, that's how it works. First, the court declares your bankruptcy, your assets get liquidated, and then you go through a process called 'discharge.' Only after that does your debt disappear, and the collections stop."

"H-Heh. But, well, it's basically the same thing, right? It just means there's one more step in the process."

"Yeah, I guess you could say that. But for a discharge to be granted, there are a few more conditions. They're not that complicated, though."

"M-More conditions? W-What kind of conditions are they...?"

"It depends on the reason you got into debt. If the debt was created through things like gambling or excessive spending, you won't get a discharge."

"W-What!?"

Okada jumped up from the couch in shock.

"Well, that's only natural, isn't it? If there were a system where gambling debts could just be wiped clean, the economy would fall apart.

By the way, I never asked you what caused your debt... But surely it wasn't gambling or reckless spending, was it?"

"W-What would happen if it was?"

"Well, that's simple. You could still file for bankruptcy, but the debt would remain. Since you're still young, the court would likely propose a repayment plan that would take several years, and

that would be it. For the next few years, you'd be working non-stop, but given your age, it shouldn't be a problem."

"T-This can't be happening!" Okada finally shouted, sounding desperate. "This isn't what I signed up for! This is ridiculous! Why should I have to work to pay it back!?"

"What are you talking about? It's your debt. Of course, you have to work to pay it back."

"Ugh..."

When I coldly stated the obvious, Okada fell silent, unable to argue. In the end, clueless university students are all like this.

"By the way, something's been bothering me as I listen to you. You didn't, by any chance, start using your credit cards with no intention of paying back the money from the beginning, did you?"

"N-No, of course not..."

Okada frantically waved his hands in denial.

"Is that so? Well, I hope that's true. But be careful—if it turns out you were borrowing money without any intention of repaying it, it wouldn't just be about paying it back or not. You'd be guilty of fraud. And since you've just turned twenty, if you were arrested for fraud, your real name would end up in the newspaper. You'd never be able to show your face in public again."

Okada's face drained of all color. It seemed he'd finally understood the gravity of his situation.

Honestly, the moment you think you can get away with borrowing money and not paying it back, you're already in the wrong. There's no way such an easy loophole exists in the world. Even a grade-schooler could understand that if they thought about it for a second.

"P-Please, do something! I'm already getting debt collection calls day and night! If my dad finds out about this, he'll cut off my allowance and kick me out!"

"You're asking me to do something, but it's your debt, isn't it? The debt collection itself is perfectly legal.

But, well, I could help you out with that. If you appoint me as your agent to manage the debt—basically, the creditor—I can take care of it. From that point on, all collection efforts would have to go through me. In other words, the calls to you would stop."

"I-I see. So, could I ask you to do that?"

"Your sister already made that request. So, I'll handle it."

For the first time, Okada’s face showed a hint of relief.

"T-Thank you. But, uh, is there any way to get the debt discharged as well? I mean, it's really hard to imagine working to pay off 10 thousand dollars..."

"You’ll have to give up on that. Like I said earlier, debts from gambling or reckless spending don’t get discharged."

Okada’s face sank again. There was no room for sympathy, so I continued, piling on.

"Besides, with no chance of getting a discharge, filing for bankruptcy would only make things worse. You’re a student, so you probably don’t own any real estate, but there’s still a chance that some of your household items could be seized."

"B-But you said I could keep one TV, right?"

"Yeah, as long as it's considered a necessary household item."

Okada sighed deeply.

"That’s a shame... I’d heard that if you went bankrupt, nothing would get seized, so I even went out of my way to buy a plasma TV—just one, of course..."

What a shame. If he really thought he’d found a loophole in the law, he’s more naive than I imagined.

"Oh, a plasma TV, huh? How much did it cost?"

"Well, I went for a cheaper one, but it still cost around 3 thousand dollars."

"Well, that’s too bad. If you file for bankruptcy, it’s almost guaranteed to be seized."

"No way! What do you mean? I’m allowed to have one TV, right?"

"That only applies to normal TVs. A TV that’s necessary for daily life doesn’t have to be an expensive one—hell, even a black-and-white one is fine, isn’t it? There’s no need for a TV that costs thousands of dollars. If you’ve got the luxury of having something like that, you should be using that money to pay off your debt. If you go bankrupt, it’ll definitely be seized and auctioned off. Some courts don’t even recognize a TV as an essential item for living."

"No way!"

"One of the purposes of bankruptcy is to liquidate your assets and reduce your debt as much as possible. You can't keep anything valuable.

As your lawyer, let me give you some advice: whether you declare bankruptcy or not, you should sell that plasma TV as soon as possible and replace it with a cheaper one. Use the leftover money to pay down your debt."

"I-I see..."

Okada slumped his shoulders in defeat.

"Well, no need to be so down about it. Unless you've got so much debt that you could never pay it off in a lifetime, declaring bankruptcy isn't something you do lightly. For the next seven years, you won't be able to use any credit cards, and your name will appear on the bankruptcy list in the official gazette. Once that happens, it's a pain to deal with. Sure, the official line is that normal people don't usually read the gazette, but with all the recent commotion, you've probably heard stories about shady loan sharks depositing money into bankrupt people's bank accounts without permission, followed by aggressive debt collection, right?

You're lucky. With 10 thousand dollars, you could pay it off in a few years of hard work, so you don't even need to go bankrupt."

Even though I was genuinely trying to encourage him, Okada's expression didn't brighten up at all.

Not that I had any obligation to comfort him, so I decided to hit him with the harsh reality, without holding back.

"Oh, and by the way, the debt you have to pay back isn't just 10 thousand dollars."

"Huh?" A slight glimmer of hope appeared on his face. "W-What do you mean? Does that mean I might be able to pay back less?"

I grinned.

"What nonsense are you talking about? It's not going down; it's going up. You know about interest, right? Sure, if a lawyer handles your debt consolidation, the creditors might give you a bit of a break. But even then, you're looking at an annual interest rate of 10%. Since you'll be paying it off in installments over several years, the total will probably end up around 15 thousand dollars."

"N-No way! Isn't there something you can do?"

"There’s one way. It’s simple: borrow 10 thousand dollars from your parents and pay off the entire debt at once. I doubt your parents would charge their own son interest."

"That’s impossible! I told you earlier—if my parents find out about this debt, they’ll disown me!"

"Oh, is that so? Well, if your parents are out of the question, then borrow from a friend or someone else. Your sister told me you have quite a few close friends, right? If you run around and beg for money, you might be able to scrape it together."

"..."

Okada fell silent, with a deeply troubled expression.

I already knew the truth—that he had barely any friends left who would lend him money. Watching him squirm in silence after my brazen suggestion was quite satisfying.

"...So that’s not an option either. In that case, it looks like your only choice is to work and pay back the loan, including the interest. I’ll negotiate with the credit card company to arrange for you to pay it off in installments. Does that sound good?"

"Y-Yes, I understand..."

Okada hung his head in defeat. Watching someone trap themselves in a mess of their own making is surprisingly entertaining.

With no parents or friends left to lend him money, he had no choice but to work and pay back the debt. There’s no easy way to make money in this world, and after this painful experience, he’d probably reform himself somewhat, just as his sister had hoped. And on top of that, I doubted anyone would ever find out that I helped push him into this situation.

I confirmed that my job here was finally done.

◆

About two weeks later.

"You seem unusually busy."

"..."

Kageno emphasized the word "unusually." He wasn’t wrong, which made it all the more frustrating that I couldn’t even muster a response.

In the past two weeks, I'd been busier than I'd been in a long time. ...Though compared to a proper lawyer, I was still probably pretty idle.

First, I had to contact each of Okada's creditors, one by one, to inform them that I had been appointed as his legal representative. That part was the easy bit. The real problem was presenting a repayment plan.

Since paying everything off at once wasn't possible, Okada would have to pay it back over the course of several years. But to get the creditors to agree to that, I had to convince them with a realistic plan that ensured the debt would actually be repaid. That was a tedious task, to say the least. The only silver lining was that his debt was only around 10 thousand dollars—an amount that was still feasible to pay off.

In the end, I managed to convince all the creditors to accept a plan where Okada would pay back 400 dollars a month while working part-time, and after two years—when he'd likely become a full-time employee—he'd increase the monthly payments. Finally, this exhausting process was coming to an end.

That's when I got a call from Okada.

"M-Mr. Yamashika! I just got a strange letter from your office!"

"Oh, it arrived, huh?"

While Okada was panicking, I replied calmly.

"W-What is this invoice!? It says I owe 1500 dollars in total for legal fees, consultation fees, and other charges!"

"What do you mean, 'what is this'? It's exactly what it says. You hired a lawyer, so of course you have to pay."

"N-No way! Are you seriously trying to squeeze that much money out of someone who was about to declare bankruptcy!? That's insane!"

Maybe it was because we weren't face-to-face, but Okada's tone was unusually bold. Perhaps this was his true nature.

"It's not insane. Lawyers aren't a charity. Any lawyer would charge at least 1200 dollars for debt consolidation work. And just so you know, that's the bare minimum. You're welcome to check with the bar association if you don't believe me."

I presented my argument in a calm and logical tone, and Okada fell silent.

One reason why so many debtors in trouble turn to loan sharks and end up increasing their debt is because of the high legal fees associated with hiring a lawyer. While there are cases where people can receive government aid, they have to meet strict criteria, like being on welfare.

"B-But you didn't say anything about fees when we first talked! That's fraud!"

"Well, I didn't mention it to you, but your sister asked me directly. She told me not to bring up the fees right away because she knew her greedy brother would back out if I did. Normally, clients are required to pay a deposit up front when they hire a lawyer. But as a favor to your sister, I let you pay afterward. If anything, you should be thanking me."

"N-No way..."

Okada let out a pathetic whimper. I was relieved that he didn't try to argue that since his sister was a minor, the contract should be void without parental consent.

At that moment, I heard a voice on the other end of the line:

"Hey, you worthless brother! It's time for your part-time job! Stop wasting time on the phone and get going! And don't forget the phone bill isn't free!"

It was a voice I recognized.

"W-Wait a minute, Kayo. I'm in the middle of an important conversation—"

"No more excuses! Stop whining and get going! Now!"

I heard what sounded like a struggle over the phone.

"Hello? Is this Mr. Yamashika?" The voice on the other end was now Kayo's. "Don't worry, I'll make sure that idiot brother of mine works hard to pay it off! Also, feel free to hang up on him if he tries calling again!"

"Ah, yeah. That really helps."

"Okay, then! Talk to you later!"

With a clatter, the phone was hung up.

"That good-for-nothing had at least one stroke of luck," Kageno suddenly muttered.

"...What's that?"

I asked, more out of curiosity than anything, and Kageno replied sleepily.

"That he has a sister who’s nothing like him."

"...Makes sense."

Make sure to repay your debts responsibly.

(The Proper Use of Credit Cards? — End)

影野英治観察記録

著・さつきいよ

Eiji Kageno Observation Record

Lately, I've spent my after-school hours and free weekends killing time at a certain law office.

The name of the office is Yamashika Law Office, run by a self-proclaimed lawyer named Zenko Yamashika.

Why did I start hanging around this office? There are two reasons.

One of them is Zenko himself, the head of the office.

I've always had an interest in the profession of law. Of course, I detest capitalist lawyers who are obsessed with money to the point where I could spit on them, but being a lawyer is the only job where you can independently resist any authority. For someone like me, who will one day take on the rotten capitalist nations, it's a perfect career.

That said, this Zenko Yamashika is a lousy lawyer who seems to take pleasure in deceiving people. The moment he steps into a courtroom, he's picking fights with prosecutors, stirring up trouble with witnesses, and even submitting what looks like blatantly fabricated evidence with a straight face. And to top it all off, he says things like, "A lawyer's job is to use any means necessary for their client," without batting an eye.

Well, as much as Zenko is the worst possible example of a lawyer, there are a few points worth acknowledging. One is his obsessive determination to win (you could also call it a refusal to lose). The other is his unconventional methods (which some might call reckless). These two traits are quite impressive, and watching him in action is entertaining. In terms of learning how to win a case, he's actually a good reference.

The second reason I hang around this office is the bookshelf filled with various books.

"Lenin's Biography," "The Glory of the Soviet Union," "Viva Communism," "The Records of Mao Zedong's Triumphant Return"... They're all rare books you hardly see anymore. If this were America in the 1950s, the entire office would probably be targeted for a book burning with a collection like this.

Why does this shabby law office have such a collection of books? Of course, Zenko, the owner of these books, doesn't actually understand the noble ideals of communism. According to him, he bought a bunch of books at a second-hand store for 1 buck each just to fill up the empty shelves and make the office look more like a law firm. But I think that's a lie. There's no way you could buy such valuable books for 1 buck.

Well, regardless of how he got them, these books are a treasure trove for me. So whenever I have free time, I occupy the guest sofa in the Yamashika Law Office, devour these rare books, and observe the eccentric lifestyle of Zenko, the oddball lawyer.

Now then.

There's another strange guy besides Zenko who hangs around the Yamashika Law Office.

His name is Eiji Kageno. He calls himself a private detective.

To describe his personality, I could simply say that he's an old acquaintance of Zenko, and there's a well-known saying, "Birds of a feather flock together." That should be more than enough to explain.

However, there are a lot of mysteries surrounding this man. The biggest mystery is his livelihood.

Whenever I visit the office, this guy is usually sprawled out on one of the sofas, sleeping. On hot summer days or cold winter days, he's there pretty much every day. Occasionally, he seems to take on some tasks from Zenko, but other than that, he doesn't seem to be working at all. There are days when he doesn't show up at the office, so maybe he sneaks off to do detective work on those days, but even then, only a few days a month at most. How does he make a living?

It's not just his livelihood that's a mystery. The things Zenko asks Kageno to do are always vague and absurd, like, "Find a suspect," or, "Find a witness who can prove innocence."

But Kageno manages to fulfill these ridiculous requests without much trouble.

How is this lazy detective, who sleeps through his days, able to pull off such feats? I've always wondered.

And then, one day, the clue to solving that mystery appeared out of nowhere—

◆

It happened on a Friday in the summer.

Midterms were coming up at school. I couldn't go out with my friends, but I didn't feel like wasting my precious youth studying for some useless test, so, as usual, I was at the Yamashika Law Office, engrossed in a book.

The scene inside the office was the same as always. Zenko was sitting at his desk, reading the newspaper with a bored look, and Kageno was napping on the other sofa across from me. The

sun had already started to set, and the cramped Yamashika Law Office was bathed in a reddish glow. I glanced at my watch and saw that it was already past 6:30 PM.

That's when I heard the sound of vibrating.

It was a sound I had grown used to hearing lately. Someone's phone was going off.

Of course, it wasn't mine. If it were my phone, it would be playing the majestic anthem of the Great Soviet Union, "The Internationale."

The vibration seemed to be coming from in front of me. The only person it could be was, needless to say, Eiji Kageno.

Kageno, seemingly woken up by the vibration like it was an alarm clock, groggily sat up on the uncomfortable sofa that, much like its owner, Zenko, seemed to radiate unpleasantness.

"Finally awake? You're really taking your time today."

I asked, with a hint of sarcasm.

"Yesterday's job was a pain."

Kageno replied, yawning.

Huh? Kageno was sleeping here until the evening yesterday too. So that means he must have worked after that, sometime during the night...

"You had a job? Did you get a request or something?"

"Client confidentiality. I can't talk about it."

"Mm."

Without even glancing at me, Kageno pulled his phone out of his jacket pocket and stared at the screen. It wasn't a call, but an email. He was doing something on it.

I became curious.

Who could this guy, who spends his days lounging around in this office, be emailing with? If it was a woman, that would be hilarious.

I closed the book I was reading, "The ABCs of Anarchism," and sat down next to Kageno. I leaned over and peeked at his screen.

"Hey, hey, who’s it from? What’s the email about?"

"It’s nothing you’d find interesting."

Surprisingly, Kageno didn’t try to hide it. He turned the screen towards me.

The contents were really not interesting at all. It was just a rant about how the guy’s boss was in a terrible mood after getting some unreasonable demands from higher-ups. It seemed like they were just exchanging trivial daily complaints.

"...What’s this? Who’s it from?"

"An employee from a company I met the other day. And just so you know, it’s a guy."

"Mm."

It was like he could see right through my expectations.

Well, yeah, I suppose no woman would write such a boring email.

"Why are you emailing with some random guy like that?"

"Does it matter who I’m talking to or what I’m doing?"

He sounded just like a certain shady lawyer I know. Then, as if the conversation was over, he stood up and said,

"Hey, Yamashika, let’s go eat."

He made the suggestion to the head of the office.

The other guy, Zenko, raised his head from the newspaper and looked at his wristwatch. After stretching as if it were a hassle, he stood up.

"Guess I have no choice. Let’s go. Hey, kid, you should head home now."

Normally, I would have no choice but to begrudgingly leave, but today was different.

"No way. My mom’s at a class reunion or something and told me to grab something outside for dinner. So I’m going with you guys today."

A beautiful girl like me was offering to join them for dinner. Normally, the proper response would be to go insane with joy, then kneel down and say, "Please, allow me to treat you."

"..."

"..."

But the way these two looked at me was like the face someone makes when they find a piece of pineapple in their sweet and sour pork.

"Hey, what's with that disgusted look?!"

"...Let's just go, Zenko."

"Y-Yeah."

The two left, as if ignoring me.

Hmph. This is just unacceptable. Do they even realize how lucky they are to be able to eat with a beautiful girl? I was seriously considering asking some old man wandering around Shibuya at night or some weirdo with a hand mirror on a train packed with girls in short skirts to explain it to them.

...But then again, expecting common sense from these guys is about as difficult as convincing someone who likes pineapple in sweet and sour pork to change their ways. I'll save my energy and not bother with something so pointless.

◆

The place we headed after leaving Yamashika Law Office was a Chinese restaurant called Seikaen.

When I say "Chinese restaurant," it might give the impression of a fancy place, but in reality, it was just a diner. Basically, all the food they served was vaguely Chinese. The taste might not be up to par with a specialty restaurant, but the difference wasn't that significant. More importantly, it wasn't pretentious, and the prices were cheap. ...Though, for someone like me who tries to watch her calories, the large portions were a bit of a downside.

Still, it seemed to be popular with Zenko and the gang, as they ate dinner here about two out of every three nights lately.

So, with that, we occupied one of the tables, and soon enough, my mapo tofu set, Zenko's Chinese rice bowl, and Kageno's sweet and sour pork set were laid out before us—a dinner appropriate for a diner. By the way, Kageno seemed to be part of the anti-pineapple-in-sweet-and-sour-pork camp as well, deftly picking them out with his chopsticks.

"But, you know."

Kageno casually started after finishing about half of his meal.

"...What?"

Zenko replied while chewing.

"The food here is good and all, but eating out every day like this must cost a lot, don't you think?"

"Then why don't you cook for yourself?"

I said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"If I could, I wouldn't be complaining."

Zenko responded bluntly.

I couldn't say I didn't understand what he meant by that.

Neither Zenko nor Kageno had any talent for cooking. No, cooking isn't something that requires talent; as long as you have the will, you can manage somehow. But these guys didn't even have that will.

If they had to prepare their own meals, including time for shopping and washing the dishes, it would take about an hour. Rather than spending that much time just to make a meal for themselves, they'd prefer to eat out, even if it costs more, and use the extra time for something they actually enjoy—that's their way of thinking.

"Which is why, Yamashika."

"...What?"

Zenko, stuffing his face with rice, gave a short reply.

"Go get yourself a wife."

Bwah!

The fraudster lawyer suddenly spat out the rice he had in his mouth.

"Ew! What the hell are you doing?!"

It was practically a rice shower.

Fortunately, I was sitting next to Zenko, so I avoided the worst of it, but Kageno's sweet and sour pork set, sitting across from him, wasn't so lucky.

Knowing Kageno, who always seemed a bit starved, I half-expected him to cheer something like, "Yay, more rice!" but thankfully, he wasn't that far gone. He simply glared at Zenko with an expression full of resentment. I guess I should be grateful he didn't try to retaliate the same way.

"Don't spout weird stuff all of a sudden, you lousy detective."

Zenko downed some cold tea to calm his throat before glaring at Kageno.

"What's so weird about it? Your office has a perfectly good kitchen. If you pick up a wife who likes to cook, it'll solve our meal problem, won't it?"

As Kageno said this, he started picking off the rice grains that had flown into his meal. Even though his dish had been tainted, it seemed Kageno's finances and nutritional condition were tight enough that he couldn't afford to waste half of his meal.

"Come on, you might have the worst personality possible, but you've got 'lawyer' as a good-sounding title. If you put your mind to it, you could probably snag a wife or two, right?"

I see. Kageno's logic made sense. I'd feel sorry for any woman who ended up as his wife, though.

"Hmph. I'm not throwing my life away just to solve your meal problem."

"Man, what a waste. Don't you think it's a good idea? You wouldn't have to go out to eat anymore. I'm not saying I'd eat for free every day either. I'd work off the meals you give me."

"No way. I'd rather work you to the bone for cash than go that far."

Without even considering it, Zenko silently returned to shoveling rice into his mouth.

"Sheesh..."

It was clear that no matter what was said, this stubborn and selfish con artist of a lawyer wasn't going to listen. Kageno seemed to understand that too, as he dropped the subject and resumed eating.

A side note. This has nothing to do with my observations, but I'll mention it anyway.

At this point, none of us had any way of knowing that, a few months later, Zenko would actually start exploiting Kageno with food as bait...

◆

After paying the bill—sadly, we split it—we left the restaurant around 7 PM.

"Yamashika, what are you gonna do now?"

Kageno asked. Zenko shrugged his shoulders dramatically.

"Don’t ask stupid questions. I’m just gonna head back to the office, lie around, and sleep."

"...Geez."

Kageno sighed, shrugging his shoulders.

It’s not exactly what you’d expect from a man in his early twenties. With all those valuable books lying around, you’d think he’d at least try to absorb some of the wisdom of the great thinkers of the past.

Maybe irked by Kageno’s reaction, Zenko, looking somewhat annoyed, said,

"And what about you? You’re just going home to sleep too, right?"

"I’d love to, but unfortunately, I’ve got work tonight."

Kageno shrugged as he said that.

Hmm, again? A job at this hour? What exactly does he do?

...Wait a minute.

As I looked at Kageno, a thought suddenly struck me. A guy like him, working at night. Could it be?

"Hey, you’re not working in the nightlife industry or something, right?!"

"You idiot, of course not!"

"Hmph."

Kageno immediately denied it in an exasperated tone.

Apparently, there was a time when these two, along with some other guy I didn't know, were called the "Host Trio." Or "Hostrio" for short. I had always thought that Kageno's face and style fit the part, and considering how broke he probably was, I wouldn't put it past him to take up a job like that.

"Hey, kid, think about it. Do you really think this guy could handle a customer service job like that?"

Zenko said. Hmm. He had a point. If a customer did something to annoy him, he'd definitely start throwing punches before anything else.

But Kageno didn't seem bothered by the comment.

"There's more to being a detective than you think. There are things that can only be done at night."

"Oh, is that so? Well then, why don't you go stir up a murder case or something in the nightlife district? I could use the entertainment, and I'll defend you at a discount, just for fun."

Zenko said something so ominous and then turned his back on us, as if to say he was done, and headed back to the office.

"Well, I'm off too. Kid, go home and get to bed already."

Kageno said as much while he too disappeared into the night.

"Hmph."

Not that it matters, but even though there were still people around, it was already nighttime. What kind of person rushes home without even offering to walk a beautiful girl like me home at this hour? Well, if those guys ever said, "Let me walk you home," it would definitely snow the next day.

Anyway.

That aside, Kageno was on my mind. What kind of work could he be doing at this hour?

I vaguely remember hearing on TV or somewhere what kinds of cases regular detectives take on. Apparently, the most common is infidelity investigations, second is finding lost pets, and after that, there's nothing until people searches come in around fifth place. Not exactly glamorous work.

With that in mind, I once asked Kageno, "Do you also do infidelity investigations?"

His answer was a firm “No.” Kageno apparently doesn’t take on that kind of work.

So when I asked him what kind of cases he does take, Kageno replied:

“The majority of cases I handle are people searches. It’s not fun watching someone else’s cheating or looking for a lost pet. I’ll have you know, though, that in this field I’m known as a top-notch detective.”

His pickiness about jobs reminded me of a certain con artist lawyer. “Birds of a feather flock together” really is a wise saying.

When I pressed further, he explained that people searches didn’t mean looking for lost children or runaway teens. For example, kidnappings. He told me that he once took on a case from the family of a kidnapping victim, worked alongside the police, and even managed to outsmart them to solve the case in the end—at least, that’s what he said, but who knows how much of that is true. Now that I think about it, Kageno sometimes helps Zenko with his court cases, too, usually by finding witnesses or suspects. So, in essence, it’s still about finding people.

“Hmm…”

And now Kageno’s working at this hour. I could understand if he were staking out a love hotel, but Kageno insists he doesn’t do infidelity cases.

My curiosity grew stronger and stronger. This is it—I have to investigate!

◆

Kageno was heading toward the center of town, where the station, department stores, and underground shopping malls were located.

I employed one of a lady’s essential skills—tailing someone—and followed him. I recently learned the technique from a book at Zenko’s office called “The Great Spy Agencies: KGB in Full Detail.”

According to the book, if there are a lot of people around and the target isn’t particularly cautious, as long as you keep a reasonable distance, don’t act suspiciously, and have a bit of luck, anyone can tail someone with ease.

That may be a lot of conditions, but I think it’s true. If someone were tailing you in a crowded city, you probably wouldn’t notice. Unless you were paranoid and kept looking over your shoulder, but who in this peaceful country of Japan would walk around constantly worrying about being followed?

Even Kageno wasn’t an exception. So, my tailing went smoothly.

Kageno didn't look like he was heading to work at all. He wandered into the underground shopping mall, browsed through books at a bookstore, bought some stationery at a 1-dollar shop. It was less "work" and more of a leisurely stroll.

It wasn't until around 8 PM, when I was starting to wonder if Kageno had tricked me, that something finally changed. He seemed to have received another email, as he glanced down at his phone screen.

The tricky part came shortly after.

Kageno put away his phone and entered a public restroom in a corner of the underground mall.

Even with my newly acquired KGB-level skills, there's no way I could follow him into the men's restroom. Well, this is underground, and there's only one entrance, so there's no way I'll lose him…

Sure enough, after a few minutes, Kageno came out. But—

"Pfft!"

I couldn't help but stifle a laugh.

Kageno had completely changed his appearance.

He was now dressed in a full suit—jacket, slacks, and tie—and even wore glasses and carried a black briefcase. The phrase "clothes make the man" doesn't quite fit here, but the look suited him so well it was almost unsettling. He looked like a serious businessman, and his usual slacker persona was nowhere to be seen. You'd never guess he was in his early twenties. He could easily pass for thirty.

Kageno, oblivious to the fact that I was following him while desperately trying to hold back my laughter, left the underground mall and headed above ground.

…Now that I think about it, he was empty-handed when he went into the restroom. Where did he get the suit and briefcase? Well, it doesn't really matter.

The next place Kageno headed was the office district, where tall buildings lined the streets.

It was just past 8 PM By now, the once-busy office district had quieted down, though thanks to the recession, late-night overtime wasn't uncommon, and people were still trickling out of the buildings.

At this point, not just Kageno's appearance but his behavior started to get strange.

He hid in the shadow of a nearby building, lit a cigarette, and started scanning the faces of people walking by, as if he were waiting for someone. Hey, don't litter with that cigarette butt.

I hid behind an empty can disposal bin, about a meter tall, next to a vending machine, keeping an eye on Kageno. With my skills, this level of surveillance was a piece of cake. When I was a kid, they used to call me "Hide-and-Seek Iyo."

A few minutes later.

Kageno suddenly darted out from behind the building and walked briskly toward a man who was approaching from the other side. I could tell that whoever this guy was, Kageno had been waiting for him.

The man was dressed casually. He looked to be in his late thirties, with a sturdy, athletic build. However, his complexion and mood seemed less than ideal.

"Excuse me, may I have a moment of your time?"

Kageno spoke up suddenly.

Hmm. The distance made it hard to hear.

I had no choice. Luckily, Kageno had his back to me. I hugged the empty can bin in front of me, using it as a shield, and slowly closed the distance between us. Ideally, I'd have a cardboard box to hide under, but I couldn't be picky.

Thanks to my flawless stealth skills, not only did Kageno not notice me, but even the people walking by seemed to avoid me as if I were invisible. No one looked my way, and it almost felt like they were deliberately steering clear of me.

They say that martial arts masters can emit such intense fighting spirit that people instinctively avoid them. Maybe my stealth skills had reached that level.

"…Are you talking to me?"

I heard the voice of the man Kageno had stopped. Despite being approached by a shady guy like Kageno in the middle of the night, he had the nerve to stop and listen. Maybe it was the glasses that made Kageno look so much like a respectable salaryman.

"I'm with a certain company."

Kageno said, holding something out.

I couldn't quite see what it was, but I could guess. Probably a fake business card or something.

Sure enough, the man took what Kageno handed him and seemed to lower his guard a little.

"You're with the Human Scout Company, Mr. Watanabe…?"

"Yes, I apologize for the sudden intrusion, but are you familiar with our company?"

"If I remember correctly, you're a headhunting firm, right…?"

"Yes, that's correct."

Kageno, who was apparently calling himself Watanabe, shamelessly affirmed.

I've heard of that company before. Something about personnel matters—if you're unhappy with your current job, give us a call—one of those companies that runs a lot of TV commercials. It's a bad habit of Japanese people to be so easily fooled just by being handed a business card from a person in a suit.

"As you might already know, there's been a severe shortage of highly skilled system engineers in recent years. I apologize for the intrusion, but our company has been investigating you, Mr. Yamaoka."

"I see."

This man, apparently named Yamaoka, gave a disinterested response, but didn't seem entirely put off. Headhunting—poaching talented individuals for other companies. It likely isn't a bad feeling to find out you've been selected as a target.

And system engineers. I've heard of them before. They're specialists in dealing with computers.

"We've heard about how talented you are as a system engineer, Mr. Yamaoka. In this day and age, someone like you would be in high demand no matter where you go.

So, I know it's rather sudden, but… is there anything about your current company that you're dissatisfied with?"

"Well… I wouldn't say I'm completely satisfied…"

Yamaoka had already settled in to listen to Kageno.

"It's already pretty late, but tomorrow is Saturday, so if you have time, why don't we grab a drink somewhere? I'd love to treat you. Of course, we can discuss the headhunting offer, but I've always wanted to talk to someone who works as a system engineer."

Kageno's sudden suggestion. He was asking a man he'd only just met to have a drink with him. Naturally, Yamaoka was hesitant at first, but Kageno, showing what appeared to be sincere politeness, continued to persuade him. Eventually, Yamaoka caved in rather easily. The suit-and-business-card combination was clearly very effective.

I hurriedly resumed tailing them after putting down the can bin.

But this was going to be a bit of a problem.

Judging from the conversation, it seemed they were headed to a bar or something. That was a little inconvenient for me. Sure, I might look mature, but I definitely don't look old enough to pass as someone who can legally drink.

Well, there's nothing I can do about it. This is the perfect time to make use of a lady's essential tool, which I always keep stashed in my bag.

I took it out of my bag. It was about the size of my thumb and coated in black paint. It was a square object, with one side covered in tiny holes.

The modern lady's essential item—a wiretap.

It was a bit… no, actually, it was really expensive. I had to dip into the emergency savings I'd been building up for my future.

Still, I managed to charm the store clerk with my irresistible appeal and got a pretty good discount, and more importantly, it came with a guarantee of high performance. It could pick up sound clearly from up to fifty meters away, even indoors. The only downside was that the battery didn't last very long.

Now, the question was how to plant it, but by this point, there wasn't much to worry about. I didn't know the details, but it was clear that Kageno was up to something shady with this Yamaoka guy. So, even if I got caught by Kageno right here, he wouldn't be able to shout something like, "You little brat! What do you think you're doing here?!" He'd have to pretend not to know me.

With that in mind, I boldly but quietly approached Kageno from behind. He was chatting with Yamaoka and didn't seem to notice me at all. Taking advantage of that moment, I slipped the wiretap into the gap in Kageno's briefcase.

"Hm?"

I felt Kageno start to turn around. But by then, I had already turned my back and started walking away.

Even though Kageno calls himself a detective, I'm sure he noticed me. But he must not have been in a situation where he could pay attention to me, because he didn't chase after me or call out.

"Is something wrong?"

"No, it's nothing."

I heard that exchange. Just as I expected. At this rate, he won't notice the wiretap either…

◆

As expected, the two of them went into a chain bar.

I crouched in the parking lot near the entrance of that bar to listen in on their conversation through the wiretap.

There's no place as deserted as a parking lot at night. Even if someone showed up, there were plenty of places to hide.

I pulled out the receiver, which looked like a walkie-talkie, from my bag. I extended the antenna, put on the earphones, and flipped the switch. Immediately, the noisy clamor of the restaurant came through. Seriously, why do adults get so loud when they drink?

There was a lot of background noise, but I could hear Kageno's voice as well.

He was spinning some nonsense about how people who had been headhunted through his company had gone on to become successful in life.

I felt a surge of hatred toward Kageno. What a guy. "Success in life" in a capitalist society—pursuing nothing but money is no different from a descent into moral degradation. It's the very antithesis of the ideals that the great thinkers who championed communism envisioned. One day, I'm definitely going to convince him otherwise…

Oblivious to my anger, Kageno continued, "So, what's your workplace like, Mr. Yamaoka?"

At first, Yamaoka only gave generic responses, but as the alcohol flowed, he started to complain more and more. The upper management's demands are unreasonable, half of his subordinates are useless, today's younger generation is especially hopeless, and the thing he can't forgive the most is his salary—despite his fifteen-plus years of experience and working from morning to midnight, he only gets paid 2000 dollars a month, and so on…

"I see. As expected, workplace dissatisfaction is never-ending, huh?"

Kageno said, feigning sympathy. I could hear the sound of beer being poured.

“Yeah. It’s really starting to weigh on me…”

“I see. Well, would you consider taking the headhunting offer from our company a bit more seriously? I’m confident we could offer you better treatment than your current situation.”

“I’d love to, but… I’ve got a contract that says I can’t move to another company until I finish the project I’m working on…”

“Oh, you’re bound by a contract like that? That’s a tough situation.”

“Well, the project should be finished in about six months. After that, I’d really be interested in discussing it with you.”

Yamaoka seemed to feel bad after noticing Kageno’s disappointed tone.

“I see. Well, if you’re still dissatisfied with your company when the time comes, please do reach out to us. I promise we’ll make sure you don’t have any trouble finding a new job.”

What a load of crap. A guy who sleeps soundly in the middle of the day could never help someone else find a job.

Not that it matters, but I was a little surprised that Kageno, who usually keeps up that smug attitude, could pull off this kind of performance.

For a while after that, the conversation continued with idle chatter and more complaints. From the sound of it, Yamaoka was getting pretty drunk.

“Oh, by the way.”

Finally, Kageno spoke again, as if he had just remembered something.

“Mr. Yamaoka, you’re the chief system engineer, right?”

“Well, yes, I am.”

“I’d like to keep this just between us…”

Kageno’s voice suddenly dropped. For a moment, I thought the wiretap had run out of battery, but that wasn’t it.

He was whispering something. I turned up the volume on the receiver, and Kageno’s voice came through again.

“Mr. Yamaoka, wouldn’t you like some money?”

“…What?”

Yamaoka responded with a startled reply.

"Well, I mean, it would be a lie to say I don't want money..."

"Exactly. You’re fulfilling unreasonable orders for the company, working from morning till night. And yet, you're only making around 2000 dollars a month. That’s unfair, no matter how you look at it. Someone like you deserves to earn more.

How about this? There's a way for you to make more money at your current job without even having to use your name."

"...What do you mean?"

This was starting to sound really suspicious... What exactly was he talking about?

"For example... Certain features of mobile phones, which aren’t widely known, hold great value in certain circles. You know what I mean, right? Like using the call control channel to locate someone."

"...Huh?"

I had no idea what he was talking about.

"...I sort of understand what you're saying. But you mean, if I provide that function, I could make money...?"

However, it seemed Yamaoka didn’t find it as confusing.

"Yes, exactly. Since you’re the chief, Mr. Yamaoka, you can do that without anyone else knowing, right? And of course, no one would bother you about it. The only people asking to use that function are detectives who can keep secrets."

"B-But that means... you're asking me to betray the company, right?"

"Yes, to put it bluntly, that’s what it means. But I’m not asking you to leak personal information or classified data. Who would be inconvenienced by using the call control channel privately for a little while?"

"W-Well, that’s true, but..."

Yamaoka fell silent.

Hmm. There were a few terms I didn’t understand, but as someone who knows the workings of the capitalist world, I had a rough idea of what Kageno was suggesting.

In short, Kageno was telling Yamaoka, who held an important position as a system engineer, to use his position to provide some kind of function and make some dirty money. Could this be Kageno’s goal?

Yamaoka seemed quite hesitant, probably because it felt like betraying the company. That’s understandable. Recently, information leaks from within companies have been quite a hot topic. I don't know much about it, but it should be some kind of crime they call "business espionage" or something like that.

And yet, he wasn’t outright rejecting the idea immediately. That meant there was some chance he might go along with it.

"...Specifically, how much would I be able to make?"

In the end, Yamaoka asked this.

"Well, I think I could promise half a grand for each favor."

"H-Half a grand!?"

"Yes, half a grand. At least 500 dollars or more. What do you think?"

"..."

He fell silent. But from the moment he asked about the amount, it was clear he wasn’t planning to outright refuse. I don’t know exactly what Kageno plans to do by securing Yamaoka’s cooperation, but I had a feeling his scheme was starting to work.

"Well, if you’re interested, feel free to come to the place on this map anytime. Just hand the business card I gave you to the owner of the shop, and he’ll take care of everything."

Kageno said that. I could hear the rustling of paper, likely as he handed over the map or something.

After that, the conversation didn’t seem particularly important. The battery on the wiretap died, and realizing there was no point in staying any longer, I started preparing to head home.

Hmm. Is this what Kageno meant by "work"? I more or less understood what he was doing. He was probably bribing someone to do something shady. But the exact goal was still unclear. I assume there’s some significance to that unfamiliar term, "call control channel," but...

"...Alright."

I made up my mind. Fortunately, tomorrow was Saturday, and there was no school. It was a bit of a shame to reveal how perfect my tailing had been, but I decided to confront Kageno.

◆

However.

What happened the next day was completely unexpected.

Ignoring Zenko’s disapproving look, I had made myself comfortable on the sofa at the Yamashika Law Office since around nine in the morning.

Then Kageno, looking sleepy, walked in.

"Hey, brat. This is yours, isn’t it?"

He held up a small black object in his right hand.

"Ugh!?"

It was the wiretap I had tossed into Kageno’s bag yesterday. ...Crap, I’d completely forgotten to retrieve it.

Trying my best to hide my panic, I said,

"S-So what? I don’t know anything about that."

"Oh really? So I can throw it away then? It seems like a pretty expensive piece of equipment. I’m not sure if it’s a good idea for a kid to have, but it’d be a shame to throw it away."

"Ugh..."

He was absolutely right. For a middle schooler like me, it would hurt too much to lose such an essential item for a lady, which cost around 100 bucks.

"F-Fine, I admit it, it’s mine. But still, how come you’re holding it?"

I tried to feign ignorance.

But Kageno’s response was completely unexpected again.

"You were tailing me yesterday, weren’t you?"

"What!? H-How do you know that!? My tailing was supposed to be perfect!"

"Are you an idiot? A kid in a school uniform carrying a trash bin around in the office district at night—anyone would notice. The passersby were just pretending not to see you."

...Crap. Wearing my school uniform was a mistake. I guess the office district wasn’t the right location either. If it had been somewhere like Shibuya, no one would have paid any attention to a schoolgirl walking around at night with a trash bin!

"Seriously, and you even threw something like this into my bag... If I hadn’t figured out it was you, I would’ve crushed it by now."

He tossed the wiretap. I hurried to catch it.

Hmm, this guy was more perceptive than I’d thought. He hadn’t shown any signs of noticing my tailing at all last night...

"So? What’s your deal? You tailed me in the middle of the night and even planted a wiretap. What are you after? I doubt you’re a spy for another detective agency."

"N-Nothing much. I was just curious to see what kind of work you do at night. That’s all."

"Oh? I didn’t expect you to be so interested in my work."

At this point, I had no choice but to go all out.

"Well, yeah! There aren’t many people with a weird job like being a detective. Anyway, tell me—what were you asking that Yamaoka guy to do yesterday!?"

"I have no obligation to tell you. It’s a company secret."

"Ugh."

This miserly attitude was just like Zenko’s.

"Come on, just tell me! I swear I won't tell anyone! Look, if you don't tell me, something bad will happen later! Next time you take a nap, I'll draw a mustache and spirals on your face! And I'll use a permanent marker!"

I rattled off my threat in one breath.

At first, Kageno looked annoyed, but eventually, he sighed and nodded.

"I guess I don't have a choice... I'd rather not be deprived of my sleep any more than I already have been..."

"Yes! That's the spirit!"

This quick-to-give-up attitude was also just like Zenko's.

"But, on one condition. Don't ever tail me again. If you do, I'll report you as a runaway girl to the nearest police box."

"Fine, I won't do it again. So just hurry up and tell me already."

It was easier said than done.

"...Jeez..."

Kageno, though reluctant, started to explain.

"That Yamaoka guy works for a major company that's about to enter the mobile phone business—"

To summarize Kageno's explanation:

Yamaoka was, in short, the chief of a team that managed the system for mobile phones.

A mobile phone, when its power is ON and it's not in a call, receives a signal called the call control channel. ...Um, I don't really understand the technical details, but in short, as long as the phone's power is ON, it can tell which base station the phone is near... or so it seems.

As long as you know the other person's phone number, you can find out where they are. Not just the prefecture, but the city, town, or even more precise locations. This system is so attractive to detectives that it would make them drool.

What’s especially useful about this system is that as long as the power is ON, it doesn't even matter if the other person doesn’t pick up the phone. You could just toss the phone into someone’s bag, and it would essentially become a simple tracking device. ...Hmm, hearing it explained like that does make it sound pretty amazing.

That said, there’s no way an outsider could easily access such a system. Even the police would need a court order.

But what if? What if, during the design phase of the system, you intentionally create a "security hole"—basically, a backdoor—that allows a select few people to easily use this function? By paying a guy like Yamaoka, you could use such a feature.

"My job is to set up those kinds of arrangements."

"Hmm."

I see. I finally started to understand a bit.

"I kind of get it... But as I said yesterday, this boils down to betraying the company, right? That Yamaoka guy seemed the same, but isn’t it surprising how easily people agree to something like that?"

"Of course not. I make sure to do my homework.

Think about it. How many office workers do you think truly dedicate themselves to their company? There isn’t a single employee who hasn’t been scolded by their boss or criticized in some way. Salaries, company policies, work conditions—everyone has some source of dissatisfaction. Even those with some loyalty to the company probably have at least one day a year where they feel frustrated. On those days, they start thinking, ‘Screw it, let whatever happens, happen.’ That’s when I strike, taking advantage of that little crack in their heart. That’s how things end up going smoothly, like they did last night."

At that moment, it dawned on me.

I remembered the email Kageno received yesterday evening. An email about how the boss was in a bad mood—something that seemed trivial at first glance.

"The email you got yesterday... was that what it was about!?"

"Yeah, that’s right. I target the subordinates of the person in question, using various methods to extract information. If I find out that ‘the boss is dissatisfied with the company,’ I immediately bring up a proposition like the one last night.

That’s my day-to-day work. Once I’ve built such a network, most requests for finding people are easy to solve. That’s why my name is well-known in this field."

"Hmm. Sounds like you’re doing something pretty complicated."

With my blunt comment, Kageno made a grimace.

"Hey, is that the only way you can put it? Show some respect. There aren’t many detectives with a network as vast as mine, you know?"

"Respect, huh..."

I did gain a little more respect for him. The way he effortlessly handled Zenko’s seemingly impossible requests was thanks to the accumulation of his daily work.

Still, it was impossible for me to actually respect him.

Suddenly, Zenko, the head of the office, started shouting.

"Hey, Kageno! We’ve got a job for the first time in a while, so get up! It’s time to repay me for that meal I treated you to four years ago!"

"Ugh..."

Kageno, of course, wasn’t motivated, but in the end, Zenko forced him to help out.

In other words, Kageno’s so-called networking wasn’t worth more than a single meal.

There’s no way I could respect him for that. With a sigh, I began searching for the book I would read today to further polish my feminine refinement.

(Eiji Kageno Observation Record — End)

Afterword

How did you find the Tactical Judgment short story collection?

I'll get straight to the point: when I first debuted, I was extremely bad at writing short stories.

Before I was given the opportunity to debut, I had written various things that could somewhat be called novels, but most of them were just me writing whatever I wanted without caring much about page length. Because of that, writing a short story where I had to create a proper narrative with a satisfying conclusion in around forty pages—long, yet short—ended up being more mentally taxing than writing a full-length novel. I'd like to think I've built up some tolerance to it recently… but who knows.

On top of that, the protagonist is a lawyer. When I was writing the short stories in the first half of this book, I was constantly stuck in trial and error, wondering what kind of story I should even write.

This time, I was given the chance to release a short story collection in this format, and I also had the opportunity to revise the works. But confronting short stories I wrote a year and a half ago is... well, to put it plainly, embarrassing. I wanted to bury my face in the floor out of sheer embarrassment multiple times while reading them. I wanted to dig a hole and disappear.

Of course, all of the short stories included in this collection were approved by my editor, Ms. S, and the team at Fujimi Shobo. I've even heard that the response to my short stories was positive enough that they allowed me to continue writing new ones, for which I'm very grateful.

But, how can I put this? The moment I see something I wrote in the past, my brain instantly reacts with rejection, without any room for debate. It's not logical at all. I don't know why.

Anyway, I'll stop rambling. Some of the short stories in this collection could use a little legal clarification, so I'll provide some comments on each one here.

Please note that there are spoilers ahead, so I'd appreciate it if you could read this after finishing the actual story.

How to Profit from a Broken Watch?

This is the very first short story I ever wrote. It holds a lot of sentimental value for me.

When debuting either through the Fujimi Fantasia Long Novel Prize or the Fujimi Young Mystery Novel Prize, it was customary to publish a short story in Dragon Magazine as part of a promotional campaign. This short story was written for that purpose.

Incidentally, during that year, the short stories of six authors, including myself, were published simultaneously. These included Mr. Tokiumi, who wrote "Goutahime", and Mr. Ueda, who wrote "The Detective with the Spiraling Whirlpool". This was a rare case of such competition, and you could feel the editorial department's message: "The battle has already begun."

However.

Until just the day before, I was merely a hobbyist who wrote things that could vaguely be called novels.

To make matters worse, at the time, I was working in a strange industry where my monthly salary exceeded 2 grand even though I had an hourly wage of only 6 dollars. Finding time to write was a challenge. I had to sneak in my personal work, away from the prying eyes of my boss and colleagues—though that's a little secret.

Anyway, I somehow managed to write a forty-page short story and submitted it—only for it to be promptly rejected and shelved.

After that, I was told, "Instead of diving straight into writing, why don't you submit a few plots first?" I thought, "Oh yeah, that makes sense," and submitted three plots. All of them got rejected.

This process of submitting and getting rejected repeated several times, until my editor, Ms. S, finally said, "Let's have a meeting with the editorial team."

At that meeting, the advice I received was:

"Tactical Judgment's characters are too old. Let's introduce a more impactful character that readers will connect with, specifically for the short stories."

But, as a novice writer who had barely taken his first steps, "impact" wasn't something I could easily grasp.

I kept thinking, "Impact... what does that even mean?" In the end, out of frustration, I threw caution to the wind and wrote what became "How to Profit from a Broken Watch?", introducing the character Iyo Satsuki.

Even I thought it was a bit too extreme, maybe going overboard, but the first comment I received from Ms. S was:

"This is exactly what we were waiting for!"

...That’s the truth.

At this point, some of you might have realized: initially, the character Iyo Satsuki didn’t exist in the Tactical Judgment series.

However, the reaction to this short story was much better than I had expected, and when it came time to publish the first volume of the series—my debut novel—we decided:

"Let’s include this character, Satsuki, and rewrite everything!"

Of course, for me, it was like being blindsided. "Whaaaaaat!?" I had no idea how many times I found myself holding my head in frustration while rewriting the manuscript.

But surprisingly, looking back a year and a half later, Iyo Satsuki has now become a fairly popular character (more popular than I expected).

More than anything, the character has saved me several times when I struggled to come up with ideas for short stories—something I’ve always been bad at. Thanks to her, I’ve become completely indebted to my editor, Ms. S, who is also known as the Queen.

How to Make 10 Times More Money with Chess?

Since the response to my previous short story had been fairly positive, I was invited again to write for a special issue of Dragon Magazine called "Fantasia Battle Royale". At the time, I didn’t have any ideas at all, but I figured, "Take the work while you can," and immediately said, "Yes." That’s how this short story came to be.

In "Fantasia Battle Royale", it’s a common practice to be given a theme to work with when writing a short story.

For this issue, the theme was "reversal."

How to Profit with Debt and a Yukata?

This was the second short story I wrote for "Fantasia Battle Royale".

This time, the theme was "summer."

In the story, there's a line that goes along the lines of:

"Surely, you're aware that debts from gambling can't be a reason for bankruptcy, right?"

To be precise, the correct statement is: "You can declare bankruptcy due to gambling debts, but you can't receive a discharge to wipe out those debts."

Generally speaking, the belief that "you can't declare bankruptcy due to gambling debts" is more widely known, so I wrote it that way.

I've explained more about discharges and related topics in the short story "The Proper Use of Credit Cards?", also included in this collection.

My First Trial

This short story turned the *Tactical Judgment* series into quite a big deal.

Allow me a brief digression: I once had an idea for a short story I wanted to try.

The first line would be: "The trial will now begin," and the last line would be: "The court is adjourned." In other words, the entire short story would be a trial from start to finish.

However, my editor, Ms. S, told me:

"We've already done plenty of trials in the full-length novels, so no."

And I thought, "Yeah, that makes sense." So I shelved the idea.

But then Ms. S suggested: "What if you made Satsuki the protagonist?"

That suggestion led me to write this so-called "Classroom Trial Arc."

This short story caused quite a stir.

Up until this point, the short stories in "Tactical Judgment" had been "popular enough" to allow me to continue writing new ones. However, "My First Trial" was different. For some

reason—though I still don’t understand how—it garnered overwhelming popularity, to the point that even I couldn’t believe it.

In "Fantasia Battle Royale", "Tactical Judgment" was initially featured as a guest contribution, but after "My First Trial", it was upgraded to regular status.

To my friend K, who responded to my question, "If we were to do a classroom trial, what would the point of contention be?" with, "Spats versus bloomers, girls versus boys." Given the current times, that’s not something we can joke about, so from now on, I’ll refer to you as my acquaintance, K.

The Proper Use of Credit Cards?

The concept I was given was "cards."

So then, when you think of "lawyers and cards," what’s the first thing that comes to mind?

I posed this question to my friends and acquaintances. And the answer I got back was the same from all ten people.

"There’s no choice but to go with that."

Thus, this short story was born.

Here’s an excerpt from the story:

‘This isn’t just true for lawyers, but for any professional. There’s nothing more irritating than a novice who thinks they know everything after skimming some basic knowledge of your field.

Law is the prime example of this. These days, anyone can turn on the TV and find legal loopholes. Young people who don’t know how harsh the world really is often act like they’re experts after picking up a few legal tidbits. But most of the time, using knowledge they learned overnight won’t end well for them.’

Yes, I'll be more careful...

Postscript

In this short story, it's written that "a minor can cancel a contract," but there are exceptions to this rule. So, if you ever get caught in a doorstep sale or something similar, please be aware of the following conditions:

1. If the minor is married.

2. If the minor used money given by their legal guardian (like a parent) as an allowance to make the contract.

3. If the minor lied about their age or claimed to have their parent's consent at the time of the contract.

4. If the contract was made two days before the minor's 20th birthday, but the payment was made after they had turned 20.

Also, in writing this short story, I had several questions about bankruptcy, which were kindly answered by a teacher from a certain free telephone consultation service in Tokyo. I'd like to express my heartfelt thanks to this teacher, who spent a full hour carefully answering my impolite, sudden questions.

Eiji Kageno Observation Record

When releasing a short story collection, it's customary to include at least one newly written short story. Naturally, I was tasked with writing a new story for this collection, but as always, I'm not very good at writing short stories.

Ms. S kindly told me, "Since it's a story for the collection, you can write whatever you want."

But, as usual, no ideas came to mind.

In the end, the idea I came up with was this:

"How about something like this for a side story? 'Military Lawyer Yamashika'—"

"No."

The answer was immediate.

"Then how about 'Lawyers!'?"

"...What's that?"

"Or maybe 'Lawyers Special.' The protagonist's catchphrase could be 'No human rights for villains.' How about that?"

"No."

Another immediate rejection.

In the end, this is the short story that was born. I hope you find it enjoyable...

Incidentally, I looked up the old national anthem of the Soviet Union, "The Internationale," and found the lyrics to be fascinatingly cool. Although it's a foreign national anthem from over half a century ago, there are various restrictions when it comes to quoting lyrics, so I can't include them here, but if you're interested, I encourage you to look it up.

Lastly, I'd like to offer my thanks.

To Ms. S, my editor, and to the editors-in-chief of both Dragon Magazine and Fantasia Battle Royale, who have given me so much support each time one of my short stories has been published, I offer my sincere thanks.

Also, whenever I'm stuck for ideas for a short story, I have this bad habit of sending out messages to all my online acquaintances via instant messenger, saying things like:

"Got any ideas? I'll treat you to a meal next time."

And I send these messages at times like midnight or 1 AM on weekdays...

To everyone who’s ended up in my messenger contacts, I offer my sincere thanks here. So, please don’t put me on your block list... especially you, Mr. Hirokawa...

"Tactical Judgment Volume 5: Travel Edition (Tentative)" is scheduled for release around September. I sincerely hope to see you all again then.

Until next time.

P.S.:

As for the "SS" in the title of this book, I’m sure most of you readers have already figured it out, but it stands for "Super Sadist."

...Yes, unless someone stops me, that’s how it’s going to stay.

Of course, it has absolutely nothing to do with a certain imperial paramilitary force from half a century ago or a certain S-company’s legendary home gaming console, so please don’t misunderstand.

タクティカル ジャッジメント
Tactical judgment
予告編
まんが：緋呂河とも
ドン
異議あり！
富士見ミステリー文庫が贈る
法廷ミステリーサスペンス！
気に入らない奴はぶっ潰せ！
こじつけ！ハッタリ！
三段論法なんでも来い！
ゴゴゴゴゴゴゴゴ
勝ち取るのは逆転無罪か!?
否！
それだけじゃあない！
その先にあるのは……
涙と感動と――
LOVE & PEACE
だがしかし！
これは戦いである！
やる時は……
検事が泣くまでヤれ!!
タクティカル・ジャッジメント
好評発売中！
「著：師走トオル イラスト：緋呂河とも」
影野英二の探偵伝説
俺の名は影野探偵だ
法の抜け道をかいくぐるタフさが要求される仕事だ
そう俺はいつだってアウトロー
三分待てと言われても従えねぇな
ずるずる
四分……四分だ……！
ちょっとのびるが量が増えた気がするからな！
エーマ!?

Tactical Judgment - Preview Chapter

Manga by: Tomo Hirokawa

Zenko: Objection!!

Text: A legal mystery suspense presented by Fujimi Mystery Bunko!

Zenko: "The one who wins is the one proven not guilty in court!? No! That's not all there is to it!"

(Sound effect: GOGOGOGO - a dramatic, intense atmosphere sound effect.)

Zenko: "This guy... I can't let him walk free. It's a trick! This is a legal battle!"

Text: What lies ahead is...

Text: Tears and emotion

Text: LOVE & PEACE

Zenko: “But! This is a battle. When it's time to fight…”

Zenko: "I’ll make the prosecutor cry!!"

Tactical Judgment - Now on sale!

(Author: Toru Shiwasu / Illustration: Tomo Hirokawa)

Text: Eiji Kageno’s Detective Legend

Eiji: "My name is Eiji Kageno. I'm a detective."

Eiji: "My job is to search for the truth while walking the thin line of the law."

Eiji: "Yeah. No matter how much they call me an outlaw, it doesn’t matter."

Eiji: "Even if they tell me to wait three minutes, I won’t obey.”

Eiji: "Four minutes… Four minutes…!”

Eiji: "It takes a little longer, but it feels like you get more that way!”

Zenko: "Eh!?"

師走トオル

しわすとおる●埼玉県在住。『タクティカル・ジャッジメント』で第2回富士見ヤングミステリー大賞準入選に選ばれる。同作にて作家デビュー。その後、新シリーズ『がらくたのフロンティア』を発表。ゲームと名のつくものなら、なんでも大好き。発作的なオヤジギャグがたまにきずだが、本人にその自覚はない……ようだ。

BOOK☆WALKER